

INTERZONE #228

# interzone

new stories

MARIO MILOSEVIC

JON INGOLD

MELISSA YUAN-INNES

JASON SANFORD

DAVID D. LEVINE

GENE WOLFE

interviewed

## READERS' POLL RESULTS

reviews of books, discs  
and films, including

NICK LOWE'S BSFA

AWARD WINNING

MUTANT POPCORN

plus news and colour art

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY / ISSUE #228 / MAY-JUNE 2010 / £3.95



PRINTED IN THE UK





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## Worldwide Distribution

Pineapple Media (t: 02392 787970)  
Central Books (t: 020 8986 4854)  
WWMD (t: 0121 7883112)

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[warwickfrasercoombe.com](http://warwickfrasercoombe.com)

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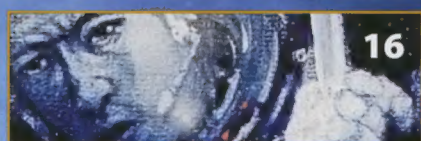
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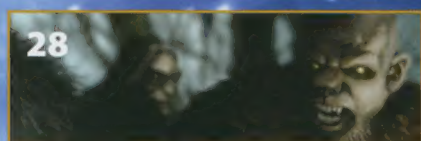
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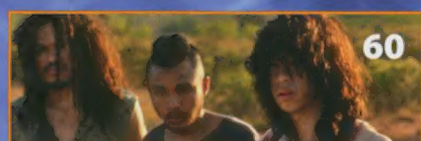
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## EDITORIAL

Many congratulations to Nick Lowe who won the BSFA Award (Non-Fiction) for *Mutant Popcorn*. I'm sure we'd all agree that seldom has an award been more deserved, especially as this the 25th year that Nick has contributed his column to *Interzone*.

Kim Lakin-Smith ('Johnny and Emmie-Lou Get Married') and Eugie Foster ('Sinner, Baker, Fabulist, Priest; Red Mask, Black Mask, Gentleman, Beast') were both shortlisted for the BSFA Short Story Award but missed out, as did Adam Tredowski – who was shortlisted three times for three *Interzone* covers – in the Art category. Bad luck to all three.

Eugie's story is still in with a shout of the Nebula (Novelette category) though, as is Jason Sanford's 'Sublimation Angels' in the Novella category.

It just so happens that these two stories took the top places in the Readers' Poll, Eugie's placing second and Jason's first. Congratulations to them both.

Jason wins for the second year running and it seems fitting that we have a new story from him in this issue. 'Plague Birds' begins on page 28.

Congratulations also to Adam Tredowski who filled the top six places in the Poll for best art.

Well done all the other contributors who placed so well in both categories.

Thanks to Martin McGrath for once again conducting the poll and collating the results, and supplying us with a lot of useful and interesting statistics in the process. As Martin says overleaf, there were more votes cast this year than ever, so thanks to you the readers too!

(If you're a new reader and feeling a little left out right now, you might like to know that back issues are available on the website...)

Don't forget that comments are welcome as we go along, not just once a year. There is a forum on the website with threads dedicated to each issue, as well as many more general topics ranging from books and films to the World Cup, and every forum member is welcome to start a new one. So if you'd like to offer some feedback on particular stories, or argue with a review, or just join in with some general lighthearted chat with likeminded people register here: [ttapress.com/forum](http://ttapress.com/forum).

## ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD

**Thog's Election Masterclass.** Gordon Brown, Zombie: 'He looked absolutely terrible. The shoulders were hunched. The flesh was literally dripping off his face...' (senior politician quoted in Andrew Rawnsley, *The End of the Party*, 2010)

**Iain M. Banks's** secret is revealed: 'Iain M Banks drops the M when he writes fiction.' (Victoria Coren, BBC4)

**Awards.**

**BSFA:** China Miéville, *The City & The City* (novel); Ian Watson & Roberto Quaglia, 'The Beloved Time of Their Lives' (short); Stephan Martinieri (artwork); and *Interzone's* own Nick Lowe for his long-running 'Mutant Popcorn' (nonfiction). **Arthur C. Clarke** shortlist: Gwyneth Jones, *Spirit*; China Miéville, *The City & The City*; Adam Roberts, *Yellow Blue Tibia*; Kim Stanley Robinson, *Galileo's Dream*; Marcel Theroux, *Far North*; Chris Wooding, *Retribution Falls*.

**Hugo** shortlist, selected. Novel: Cherie Priest, *Boneshaker*; China Miéville, *The City & The City*; Robert Charles Wilson, *Julian Comstock*; Catherynne M. Valente, *Palimpsest*; Robert J. Sawyer, *Wake*; Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl*. Dramatic/Long: *Avatar*, *District 9*, *Moon*, *Star Trek*, *Up*. Elsewhere, Dramatic/Short includes three *Doctor Who* episodes; *Ansible* and *Interzone* are again Semiprozine contenders.

**James Tiptree Jr** (gender exploration): Greer Gilman, *Cloud & Ashes*; Fumi Yoshinaga, *Ooku: The Inner Chambers*.

**Nebula** shortlist, novel category: Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl*; Christopher Barzak, *The Love We Share Without Knowing*; Laura Anne Gilman, *Flesh and Fire*; China ville, *The City & The City*; Cherie Priest, *Boneshaker*; Jeff VanderMeer, *Finch*.

**Philip K. Dick**. C.L. Anderson, *Bitter Angels*.

**SFWA Author Emeritus:** Neal Barrett, Jr. *Bram Stoker* (horror), novel category: Sarah Langan, *Audry's Door*.

**Speaking of Stoker:** Dublin Council liked his great-great-nephew's proposal for a statue of Bram Stoker in the man's native city; but alas, the Irish economy has been sucked dry. So, no Dublin memorial unless

Stoker's family can raise some €100,000... (*Independent*)

**As Others See Us.** 'Two science fiction films are up for Oscars, much to the delight of single men with a penchant for multi-sided dice.' (*Guardian Sports*)

**Sir Ian McKellen** 'weighed into the current British Airways strike [...], announcing: "Nice well-behaved hobbits don't join unions."' (*Independent*) Tolkien fans recall that nice well-behaved hobbits were easy meat for Saruman until the rough aggressive ones got home.

**Steven Moffatt** explains his show's inner non-sfness: 'For me, *Doctor Who* literally is a fairy tale. It's not really science fiction. It's not set in space, it's set under your bed. It's at its best when it's related to you, no matter what planet it's set on.' (*Guardian*)

**Magazine Scene.** Editors of China's *Science Fiction World* published an open letter complaining about the sins of their 'unprofessional' boss, including making them do the writing, translation and artwork in-house rather than pay actual writers, translators or artists. Monthly circulation dropped from 150,000 to 130,000 since the start of the new regime. (Those envious moans you hear are from Western editors.) Major Chinese authors backed the SFW protest, and the offending chief editor was replaced.

**As Others See Some Of Us.** 'Klingon speakers [...] inhabit the lowest possible rung of the geek ladder. Dungeons & Dragons players, ham radio operators, robot engineers, computer programmers, comic book collectors – they all look down on Klingon speakers. Even the most ardent *Star Trek* fanatics, the Trekkies, who dress up in costume every day, who can recite scripts of entire episodes, who collect *Star Trek* paraphernalia with mad devotion, consider Klingon speakers beneath them.' (Arika Okrent, *In the Land of Invented Languages*, 2009)

**Tomb It May Concern.** A no doubt particularly curvaceous new road in Derby is, after a public vote, to be named Lara Croft Way.





> Where could Langford be hiding in the 2010 Eastercon hotel? Try the bar...

**Maura McHugh** blew the whistle again, pointing out the near-total invisibility of women in February's *SFX* magazine horror special – ironically published during Women in Horror Recognition Month.

**'Hogfather' = Bacon?** Review of another

book on the who-wrote-Shakespeare follies: 'Perhaps in 400 years, we'll be analysing the Discworld novels to discover the "real" Pratchett.' (*Independent*)

**Sigourney Weaver** was amazed to learn the genre of *Avatar*: 'I thought, "Science

fiction? Really? Is that what this movie is?" Because to me it's just a great story that happens to take place in another time.' (*USA Today*)

**London in 2014!** This World SF Convention bid was launched at Easter, and is so far unopposed. Keep watching the skies.

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Long Drop Dept.* 'The screams of the injured man followed him as he fell to the concrete an infinite distance below' (E.C. Tubb, *Veruchia*, 1973) • *Dept of Pointy Things.* 'Her interest was as pointed as the breasts on which she gently splashed cold water...' (Robert Holdstock, *Merlin's Wood*, 1994) • *Erotica Dept.* 'My potential for ecstasy was such that the lightest touch of his fingertip on my nipple was pure rape!' 'Penway became keenly aware of his nakedness when he realized he had no place to carry the smallest scrap of food.' 'He sat in the roof garden deliberately training his mind on a chess problem, but Jenka Wale's breasts kept blurring his mental vision. Her pubic mound was a glowing enticement on the visualised chessboard.' 'Why not lose himself in the ecstasy of her body? But then, realizing the trend of his thoughts, he stiffened and took hold of himself.' (all Paul W. Fairman, *I, The Machine*, 1968)

## R.I.P

**Sid Fleischman** (1920–2010), versatile US author whose works include many supernatural novels for children, died on 17 March – the day after he turned 90.

**Michael Foot** (1913–2010), much-respected UK politician whose books included the near-future speculation *The Trial of Mussolini* (as by Cassius, 1943) and the biography *H.G.: The History of Mr Wells* (1995), died on 3 March aged 96.

**Jim Harmon** (1933–2010), US fan, author and radio producer who published some 40 sf stories, mostly for *Galaxy* and *If* in the 1950s–60s, died on 16 February; he was 76. Nonfiction included *The Great Radio Heroes* (1967) and other studies in genre nostalgia.

**John Hicklenton**, UK comics artist who worked on *Judge Dredd*, *Nemesis the Warlock* and other 2000AD regulars, died at a Swiss assisted-suicide centre on 19 March.

He was 42 and had suffered ten years with multiple sclerosis.

**Mervyn Jones** (1922–2010), UK author and journalist whose 29 novels include the sf future-war story *On the Last Day* (1958), died on 23 February aged 87.

**Robert McCall** (1919–2010), US artist who did much NASA work and painted posters for 2001, *Star Trek: TMP* and other sf films, died on February 26 aged 90.

**William Mayne** (1928–2010), highly-regarded UK author of over 100 children's/YA books, including such notable fantasies as the *Earthfests* trilogy, *A Game of Dark*, *It* and *Cuddy*, died on 23 March. His career had ended shamefully with a 2004 conviction for past child abuse.

**Shio Sato** (Chiyoko Sato, 1950–2010), Japanese manga artist best known for *Yumemiru Wakusei* (*The Dreaming Planet*), *One Zero* and the short *The Changeling*, died on 4 April; she was 59.

**John Schoenherr** (1935–2010), US artist whose most famous sf image was the giant *Prophet of Dune* sandworm on a large-format *Analog* (March 1965), died on 8 April aged 74. He won the Hugo as best professional artist in 1965.

**David Severn** (David Storr Unwin, 1918–2010), author of YA novels of which several – like the memorably dystopian *The Future Took Us* (1957) – involved timeslips, died on 11 February; he was 91.

**Peggy White** (1927–2010), long-time fan and convention-goer since the 1950s heyday of classic Irish Fandom, died on 8 April. She was married to James White from 1955 until his death in 1999.

**Patricia Wrightson** (1921–2010), Australian author whose sf and fantasy (often for children) made effective use of Aboriginal myth and the Australian landscape, died on 15 March; she was 88. In 1986 she received the Hans Christian Anderson medal.



# READERS' POLL

**Martin McGrath:** We had the most number of voters since I took over the ballot in 2005, although the actual number of votes cast fell back slightly since last year (ie more people voted but they voted for a smaller number of stories).

It was another very good year measured by the ratio of positive to negative votes (a healthy 6.2:1).

For the first time no story in the poll finished with a negative aggregate score – and every story received at least two positive votes. The number of stories that received no negative votes was also high.

'Sublimation Angels' by Jason Sanford won relatively comfortably, ahead of 'Sinner, Baker...' by Eugie Foster and 'The Festival of Tethselem' by Chris Butler, but below the top three stories things were very close and votes were much more widely spread than in previous years.

Most controversial story was 'Bone Island' by Shannon Page & Jay Lake, followed by 'After Everything Woke Up' by Rudy Rucker and 'Johnny and Emmie-Lou Get Married' by Kim Lakin-Smith both with an equal number of positive and negative votes.

Most popular issue, by combined aggregate score of stories, was #221, followed by #224, #225, #223, #222 and #220.

We received a record number of votes for art this year (more than double last year's previous high) with 66% going to Adam Tredowski's suite of covers. The most popular of 2009's interior artists were Mark Pexton and Warwick Fraser-Coombe.

> Thanks once again to Martin and everyone who voted and commented. Congratulations to the winners and runners up in both categories.

**Bob Lawson:** What do the stories in *Interzone* mean to me and why do I feel the need to tell anyone? Because paraphrasing the words of others often tells what I want to express far better than my own efforts I'll direct you to Constance Vidor's piece in *Slightly Foxed* No.19 in which she gives three literary examples of the power of stories and their importance to the human spirit.

Namely Mircea Eliade's introduction to his novel *The Forbidden Forest* in which he describes how some prisoners survived the horror of Stalin's Siberian labour camps, Henri Charrière's *Papillon* describing false imprisonment and soul crushing solitary confinement and finally Malika Oufkir's *Stolen Lives: Twenty Years in a Desert Jail* in which the author and her family were imprisoned. The subtle link between these events is not imprisonment but the simple power of stories. In an age of URLs, spreadsheets and instant gratification stories are as important as ever if we are to find some horizons that are ours and ours alone.

Another way of looking at it is to imagine how Randolph Jaffe felt as he sat in the Dead Letter Room, Omaha, Nebraska in Clive Barker's *The Great and Secret Show* when he realised that he was on to SOMETHING.

*Interzone* do that SOMETHING better than anyone else.

Throughout the period 220–225 there has been much to enjoy. My top three stories are as they say, in no particular order 'Bone Island' (225), 'Saving Diego' (221) and 'Lady of the White-Spined City' (222) with 'Microcosmos' (222) demanding to know why it's not been included. The most memorable issue was the outstanding 221. Each story was a snug fit between the cover of the year and the whole is certainly greater than the sum of its parts.

The only story of the year that didn't hold me was 'Monetized' (220) and the weakest issue was the selfsame 220.

Artwork has been as strong as ever with my favourite Warwick Fraser-Coombe having another strong showing and I'm personally delighted that he's got the covers gig for this year. I enjoyed the pairing of author to artist with Dominic Green and Daniel Bristow-Bailey both holding their own in a strong partnership.

Thanks for showing me the oasis – I've rested well.

**Piet Wenings:** Although I didn't really like the cover, in my opinion issue 220 was the best issue last year. Last year, two stories received my 'stand-out status', which is exemplary for *Interzone*. I read *PostScripts* and *Asimov's* along with *Interzone* and almost always *Interzone* is able to have something refreshing in the pages. I welcome the experiments and new takes on old tropes. 30% of the stories are in my likes list and 21% are dislikes. I really don't care if some tales don't do it for me. Mostly, I want to applaud Jason Sanford and Eugie Foster for creating memorable stories that keep me hungry for more.

**Scott Beeler:** In my opinion 2009 was easily the strongest *Interzone* year in the five or so that I've been a reader. Several stories were clearly worth my vote and would have been my favourite of the year out of a different batch.

Several of my favourites featured in some way off-kilter ideas which if written with less elegance or flair would have seemed jarring, but which with the authors' level of craft made for attention-grabbing reads: stories like Foster's 'Sinner, Baker...', Sean McMullen's 'Mother of Champions', and Jeremiah Tolbert's 'The Godfall's Chemsong'.

Others contained more straightforward concepts but featured depths of character and emotion that really struck me: Suzanne Palmer's 'Silence and Roses', Jason Sanford's 'Sublimation Angels', and Rebecca J. Payne's 'By Starlight'.

I also greatly enjoyed the comedic mash-up of different elements in Lavie Tidhar's 'Funny Pages', and the spooky power of Shannon Page & Jay Lake's 'Bone Island'.

Congratulations on a great year and bring us more like that in 2010 and beyond!

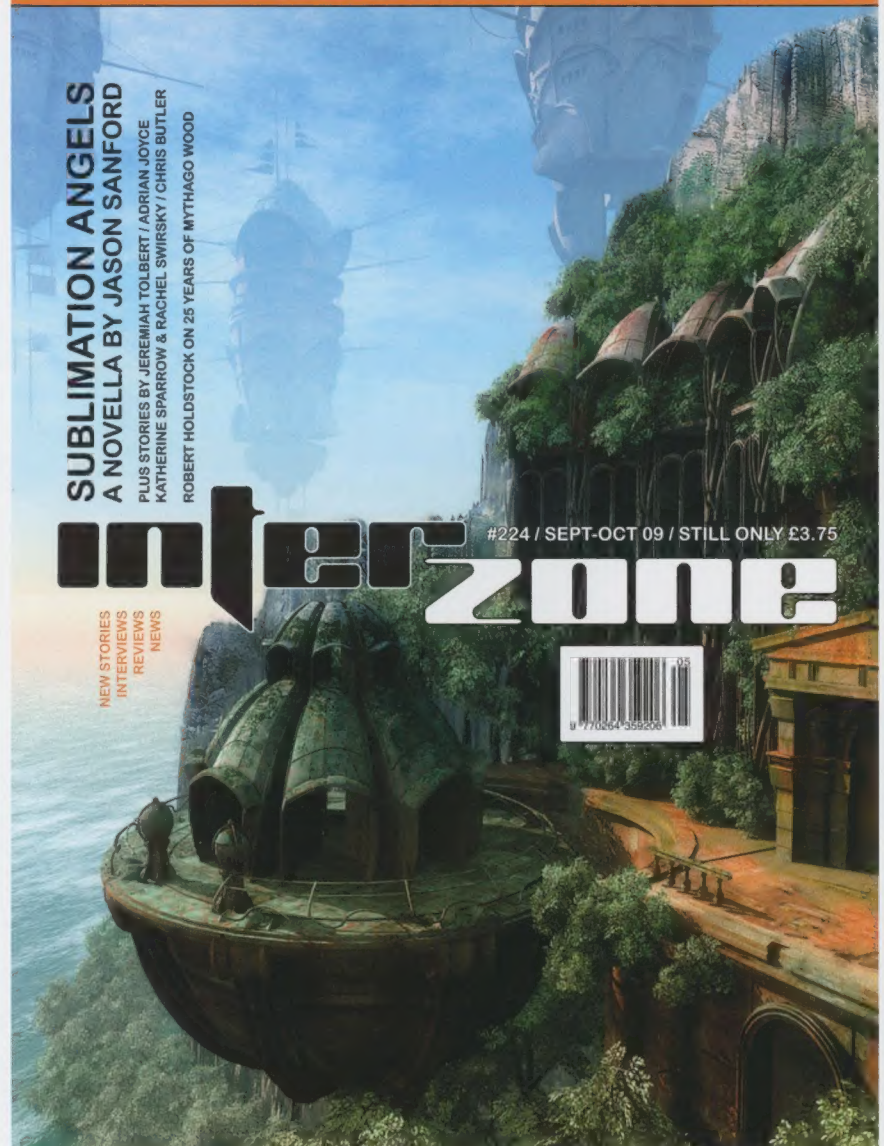
**Chris Geeson:** Issue 225 was my favourite this year, with a brilliant cover and the best variety of stories, reflecting how fabulously broad the genre of sf and fantasy can be. I'd also like to say how much I look forward to reading the book/film/DVD reviews, which are always more informative and in-depth than anywhere else.

**David Smith:** These are my favourite stories from an excellent selection that you have published over the past year. Each one had something unique about it, something that I could not remember having come across before, to make it special. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for the very high standards that *Interzone* has achieved.



**MOST POPULAR STORIES****1 Sublimation Angels****Jason Sanford****2 Sinner, Baker, Fabulist, Priest...****Eugie Foster****3 The Festival of Tethselem****Chris Butler****4 By Starlight****Rebecca J. Payne****5 Saving Diego****Matthew Kressel****6= Funny Pages****Lavie Tidhar****6= Silence and Roses****Suzanne Palmer****6= Home Again****Paul M. Berger****6= Coat of Many Colours****Dominic Green****6= Unexpected Outcomes****Tim Pratt****6= Here We Are, Falling Through Shadows****Jason Sanford****7= The Godfall's Chemsong****Jeremiah Tolbert****7= Mother of Champions****Sean McMullen****7= Black Swan****Bruce Sterling****7= A Clown Escapes From Circus Town****Will McIntosh****8 Glister****Dominic Green****9= The Killing Streets****Colin Harvey****9= Lady of the White-Spined City****Sarah L. Edwards****10= Butterfly Bomb****Dominic Green****10= Far and Deep****Alaya Dawn Johnson****10= Fishermen****Al Robertson****MOST POPULAR ARTWORKS****1 Cover Art (224)****Adam Tredowski****2 Cover Art (225)****Adam Tredowski****3 Cover Art (221)****Adam Tredowski****4 Cover Art (222)****Adam Tredowski****5 Cover Art (2220)****Adam Tredowski****6 Cover Art (223)****Adam Tredowski****7= Here We Are, Falling Through Shadows****Mark Pexton****7= Johnny and Emmie-Lou Get Married****Warwick Fraser-Coombe**

INTERZONE SCIENCE FICTION &amp; FANTASY / 'BRITAIN'S LEADING SF MAGAZINE' SUITE 101



&gt; Favourite story and artwork are both from issue 224

[ttdpress.com/interzone/backissues/](http://ttdpress.com/interzone/backissues/)**COMING SOON**

> New stories by Lavie Tidhar, Antony Mann, Jim Hawkins (right, illustration by Richard Wagner), and others

> Interview with China Miéville

> The 25th anniversary of Mutant Popcorn

> More news, more reviews, more surprises...

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**The Untied States of America**



**Mario Milosevic**



## Five days ago

I SIGHTED LAND off the eastern cliff. I was doing a standard search of the water, part of my job. I stood on the edge of the precipice of my home state of Washington, the water lapping at the rocks a couple of thousand feet below me, a thin line of white marking the shore line. There was a beach, of sorts, down there. I sometimes wanted to descend to it, but never had the nerve. It would be an epic rock climb, something I was too old for anyway. An old woman. Good only for looking out to sea.

The air that morning was clear, and the sea was calm. No telling why another state drifted into range. I tried to see if it also had a white line at the water mark, but it was too far away to tell. Really, it was nothing more than a brown bump on the horizon. A tiny swelling.

A brisk wind snapped at my pants. I clutched my jacket tighter around my throat.

My estimate was at least 80 miles away. Which state was it? Who could tell? They all looked alike from this distance.

I had to inform my fellow travelers. Any time a state comes into view, there is a danger of collision. So far, almost seventy years after the break up, we have avoided crashing into any other state, but there was no guarantee our fortune would continue.

I needed to go back to sound the alert.

But something about seeing the other state held me to the edge of the cliff. It had been a couple years since the last incident. That time we came within a couple of miles. I saw people waving at me from the other state. I waved back. They cupped their hands to their mouths and shouted at me, but the sea air snatched their words away and I could not tell what they were saying. I shouted to them until I was hoarse, but I'm sure they could not hear me either. I watched them drift by. The currents of the open ocean are completely unpredictable.

I saw vegetation on the other state. It was low in the water, so I knew it wasn't a mountain state. Perhaps a coastal state, like Florida? Perhaps.

In any case, it drifted to the north and I watched it wistfully, wondering if my son had made it there.

## Before I was born

MY GRANDMOTHER HELPED with the break up of the country. She was pregnant with my mother at the time. She lived in Eastern Washington state, right smack up against Idaho. When I was growing up I remember her saying something about people from Idaho. She didn't like them. She was glad they were now across an ocean and she didn't have to look at any of them. Never told me why. Maybe she never had a reason. In any case, she was only too happy to drop the pellets along the border.

You know about the pellets don't you? They arrived in the mail of anyone living within fifty miles of a state line. Any state line, anywhere in the country. The instructions were clear. Take the pellets to the border and drop them there and leave them. Thousands, maybe millions of people did exactly that. My grandmother being one of them. The pellets cooked in the sun. This was August, when even Minnesota and Maine get sun. The pellets expanded, grew heavier, and sunk into the ground. As they went, they ate the earth.

There's no other way to describe it really. They chewed down through the crust of the earth until they got to the magma below.

The break up was just that simple. No one knows where the pellets came from, or what they were made of. If you want to know the truth, I'm not even sure there *were* pellets, but that's how the story has come down to us, so who am I to argue with it?

Those first few days must have been amazing. The sound of rocks splitting, rivers falling over cliffs into the wounds between the states. Steam rising as the water touched the magma.

Imagine planes in the air at the time, looking to land at an airport, when suddenly the airport is not where it's supposed to be because the city, stuck on top of a floating



state, has moved under the plane.

Within a few days there was no contiguous land between Mexico and Canada, just some 48 gigantic barges made of rock, slowly moving into the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.

We were no longer the United States of America. We had become a roaming group of isolated islands, each one independent of the other, with roads and bridges, that once crossed state lines, now nothing but broken metal, concrete, and asphalt hanging off the cliffs like rags. Mountains were cut in two. Plains neatly bisected. Forests split up like divorcing families.

Most rivers were completely drained within a day. They simply emptied off the top edge and tumbled into the water below. With no connection to neighboring states, rivers could not replenish. State governments immediately saw that water would be an issue in the new reality of the Untied States of America. Rationing measures became the order of the day.

Gas and oil pipelines broke, spilling into the ocean. Communication lines were severed. Anything that crossed a state line was broken. Each state became an isolated entity unto itself.

All this happened years before I was born. My mother told me about it, even though it happened before *she* was born. She talked about the old country like it was something she still wanted. Like it was something she had once lived in. She wanted to be attached to the other states.

But that would never happen. Not anymore. You can't put the pieces back together.

## Four days ago

I INFORMED MY fellow Washingtonians, as was my duty, by calling the central government agency and carefully describing what I saw. The voice on the other end of the line was skeptical.

"We haven't had a sighting in 28 months," he said.

"I know," I said.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Of course."

He made a noise I could not decipher. "A lot of people think all the other states crashed or sank."

"I don't know why they would think that," I said. "We haven't crashed or sunk."

"Go out there again," he said.

"I'm telling you I know what I saw," I said, now irritated with his attitude.

"Go," he said. "We need corroborative evidence anyway."

"I can't corroborate my own sighting."

"Just go."

He hung up. I didn't go that day. I was in too much of a sulk. Besides, it was almost dark by then. I woke the next morning before dawn and walked to the edge of the cliff and waited for the sun to come up and illuminate the water. I strained my eyes, in the darkness, to see lights. Surely Florida, or whatever state it might be, had lights, just as we did. But I saw nothing. Maybe the man on the other end of the line was right. Maybe I imagined seeing land in the ocean.

I sighed. Was my own history betraying me? Perhaps, perhaps. I only knew that I wanted to see land. Yearned to. We were not meant for this life. We should never have separated. The break

up was the biggest mistake in history. I hated that a member of my own family had taken part in it.

Such were my thoughts as the wind, cold and wet, swirled around me. The sky began to lighten. I stood up and watched the world come to life. There were whitecaps in the ocean. We had been drifting north for some time, catching a current into colder climates. Crops, under stress at the best of times, with the natural rhythm of the seasons completely out of whack, were straining under the conditions. The entire state had been put on rationing of food, in anticipation of possible shortages.

As the sun rose into the sky, flooding the water and my state with illumination, I saw that the land I saw the day before was gone. We had drifted apart.

I felt so much disappointment that I could barely contain my grief. I cried. I stood on the lip of the state and cried. I could not even tell what I was crying for. A united state that I had never experienced? A nostalgia for a past that seemed brighter than this present? Silly sentimental thoughts. They were not worthy of me.

Do you want to know how I know I am right about the folly of the break up? Simple. No one lives where I live. I am alone. After the break up people moved inland, as close to the center of Washington as possible. They didn't want to see the ocean. They didn't want to be presented with the stark evidence of their isolation.

In any case, as the break up was happening, immense earthquakes shook our state. Tall buildings in downtowns toppled. Entire cities became nothing but shattered wrecks. It was best to move to the rural center anyway.

But some, people like me, remained on the edges. A network of us watchers, scanning the horizon for evidence of close encounters.

I was not sure that others were doing their jobs. Why had no one else reported seeing the land? It was long and near enough that another watcher would have seen it.

You see my situation? I could not accuse anyone else of not doing their job. That would be unkind and unprofessional. But the evidence was clear.

I strained my eyes even more. I shielded my face from the glare of the sun.

No land, but something else.

A dot.

Far off in the ocean, a speck of *something*, floating on the water and heading in my direction. I leaned forward. It looked like a small boat. It had that fish shape. I thought I saw oars paddling the water on either side, like a water bug skimming the surface.

And finally, after straining my eyes so much I thought they would pop, I believed that I discerned a figure. A person operating the oars.

My spine tingled. Someone from the other state was coming here. To Washington. I could barely contain my excitement.

## After I was born

I ASKED MY grandmother once, when I was twelve and she was eighty, decades after the break up, why she did it. Why did she obey some crazy instructions she got in the mail?



She didn't want to answer me. How could she? It made no sense. Even to a thirteen year old, it made no sense. Maybe especially to a thirteen year old. At that age, you are finely attuned to bullshit.

"Susie," she said, "it was a crazy time. We were ready to try anything to make it better."

I remember thinking: *This was better? All the states floating around in the ocean out of sight of each other was better?*

"You'll have to explain that one to me, Gramma," I said.

Now imagine her in a rocking chair with a corncob pipe in her mouth, staring up at the sky and composing an answer for her precocious granddaughter. That's not how it was, but that's how I have come to remember it after all these years. My grandmother's gone and I still have an active imagination and that's how I remember her. That's how I like to imagine her.

"Are there people in your school you don't like?" she said.

"Sure," I said.

"Why?"

I shrugged. "Well, Walter is mean, and Gayle doesn't like me so why should I like her, and Ingrid likes boys way too much to be friends with me so I'm not friends with her."

"That's how it was with us in those days. Most of the states couldn't get along. We wanted to be independent of each other."

"Excuse me, Gramma," I said, "but that is just plain crazy. You don't cut yourself off from the rest of the country just because you don't get along."

"Looking back on it," she said, "you're completely right. But we didn't see it that way. We thought the pellets were the answer to our problems. Independence." She stared at me with open eyes, like she was daring me to talk back to her, which didn't make a lot of sense right then because I had no desire to defy her. I just wanted to know the story. The real story.

"What happened after the pellets ate the borders?" I said.

My grandmother looked at the sky. Like she was trying to decide if I was old enough to hear the real story. She must have concluded that I was.

"We didn't expect the destruction," she said. "Now, I wonder how stupid we could have been. Many people died. Buildings collapsed. Fires everywhere. It was awful. We were mostly away from all of that. We didn't hear about it until later, but we saw the smoke in the air. The ground shook. It just rattled. I was afraid it was going to break my bones, to tell you the truth. It didn't, but I still think it could have. It took days for things to come to some kind of order again. So much destruction. The land was scarred by what we did. Your grandfather died, did you know that? He was at work when the break up happened. He sold cars. He was in his office when the roof caved in on him and killed him. Oh, Susie, it was awful. More than awful. We all felt terrible. But it was like we were under some kind of spell. When your mother was born five months later, it was a completely different world. The state was floating in the ocean, just like all the other states. There were much fewer people. We spent a lot of time burying the dead. And things were primitive. We couldn't communicate with the other states. We wanted them back, but it was too late. I turned all my attention to your mother. I wanted her to have the best possible life she could have, especially since we had torn her world apart."

She told me what she had to tell me, and I knew she would

never say it again, so I tried to remember it as best I could.

"You never married again?" I asked my grandmother.

"It wasn't something I wanted," she said. "All I could think of was your mother. She became my life."

## Three days ago

DO YOU EVER walk barefoot? You, reading this, I'm asking if you walk barefoot. Think about it.

I don't mean in your house or apartment. I mean outside. Letting your feet touch the ground.

It's not a bad way to spend some time. It's about the only way to get to know the land you live on. If you don't let your soles come in contact with dirt, you're like the orphan who doesn't know who his parents were.

The day after I saw the boat and the figure in the water, I watched the sun come up over the ocean. I stepped out of my house, put my bare feet on the ground, and walked toward the light. I went a mile or so over grass and mud, and stopped at the edge where the cut had been made. The sky was lit up pretty good. I looked across the water, hoping to catch a glimpse of the lone sailor. No luck this morning. I floated on the molten core of the planet, along with the rest of the state, which gave a peculiarly solid, yet lonely feeling.

So the sailor was gone? Just like that?

I felt lost. I had never met the person and yet I was devastated by his absence. How could such a thing be?

I looked down at the shore line. The waves moved in slow motion from this distance, as if they were memories or dream sequences. No sound. The waves broke on the rocks, had to, but I heard nothing. There was driftwood down there. And shells, no doubt. All the items that make a beach.

I strained my eyes again, narrowed my eyelids to block out the glare of the sun and discerned a small dark speck at the intersection of blue and white.

The boat I saw yesterday was beached.

Now where was its occupant?

I scanned the beach line carefully but saw nothing. Then I turned my attention to the rock face, the cliff that had been carved out by my grandmother and her cohorts. The cleaving had not been a perfect thing. There were ruts and breaks in the rock. Over the years grass and bushes, even small trees, had found anchor there, pushing their roots into the exposed rock. Cormorants and sea gulls had built nests, creating settlements of their own. Down at the bottom of the cliff, near the beach, I detected a small motion. I moved to the side to get a different angle on it, to ensure I was not fooling myself.

I was not. The figure from the boat was definitely climbing up the face of the cliff.

I put out my hand and waved to him. I shouted. "Hello!" He made no indication that he heard me. Well, he probably *didn't* hear me. How could he, so far down and with the wind swirling around him. Not to mention the sound of seagulls as they carved arcs in the air.

How long would it take him to climb the cliff? I had no idea. A day? An hour?

A day seemed closer to the truth. He was starting out at first



light. He probably needed to get up here before dark. Did I have time to inform the network?

I decided there was time, but also, on the spot, decided there was no reason to tell. This was going to be my secret, at least for the time being.

I stretched out, belly on the grass, so my head was just over the precipice. I stared down at the man (I was pretty sure now that he was a male) and watched, mesmerized by his progress, which seemed so slow. Silently I cheered him on. I wanted him to get here. I wanted to meet him.

He climbed steadily and took only small rests. The day wore on. The sun grew hot. I was uncomfortable and could only imagine how he must be doing.

About mid afternoon I thought to get some food for when he got to the top, but I did not want to leave my spot on the cliff. I did not want to break contact – however tenuous – with him. It was as if by leaving my place he would disappear. So I didn't move.

He still had about a third of the way to go, and the sun was creeping toward the horizon, when he stopped. He looked up. I waved at him and shouted.

"Are you all right?"

He waved back. "I'm fine," he shouted back. His voice seemed small.

"Who are you?"

"A friend," he said. "There's a small cave here. I'm going to spend the night."

He disappeared into a grotto out of my view. I watched the spot in the fading sun until it was completely lost in the darkness.

## After I was married

MY GRANDMOTHER DIED and my son was born. The three of us, my child, my husband, and me, moved to the edge of the state. My parents were upset by this development. They wanted us to live near them in the interior, but my husband had some peculiar ideas about the world. He wanted to see the ocean, he said. The water, so much of it, appealed to his sense of adventure. He wanted to know the full extent of the world and he could know that only by living near the sea.

After the break up, Washington state – and all the others I had to assume – bobbed up in the water, raised itself like a balloon floating in the air. It was as though the land reached up for the skies when it had been severed from the rest of the states. When I was younger and my grandmother told me about this, I thought it was wonderful, a marvelous development that turned us all into exalted beings, reaching for the stars.

That was when I was younger. As I grew up, I began to think of the rising as a curse. It created towering cliffs all along our state, further isolating us from the world by making the ocean a perilous climb away in which one had to risk one's life to traverse the cliff face. There are some, however, who relish the view from on high. My husband was one of them.

For many years I refused to go near the edge of the state. I knew we were a floating land mass. I did not need to be reminded of it. But my husband went out every day. He walked for hours along the cliff edge and after a while I noticed that when

he returned from these visits he was always happier than when he left. I wondered what could be so marvelous about seeing the ocean everyday. It was just a featureless expanse of blue.

Since we lived on the edge, we became part of the network of observers charged with looking for drifting states that might collide with us. They strung a line out to our house and installed a phone, the height of modernity on our little island, and we took to making daily reports. Mostly we called in and said the ocean was clear. Occasionally we would see other states, always a long way off. We dutifully reported these sightings and imagined that someone on the other end was taking down all the sightings and using them to track the comings and goings, the *meanderings*, of the various states that once made up our country. I supposed this was a valuable thing to do and accepted our role in helping to make it accurate and true.

That is what brought me out to the cliffs: the sense of duty to my state. I brought my son with me. He was less than a year old, not even named yet, when he first saw the ocean. I walked slowly up to the edge and stopped some ten feet from it. My husband was with me. He strode right to the edge. My heart leaped in my throat. How could he be so casual?

"How far down is it?" I asked. The wind caught my words and tossed them over the edge. Or so it seemed to me.

He shrugged. "A long way. You wouldn't want to fall." He grinned. I was shaking with fear.

"Please step back from the edge," I said.

He did as I asked, though reluctantly. My son, cradled in my arms, pushed at me with his feet. He wanted to get closer to the water, I could see that. He reached for the ocean with his hand, clenching and unclenching his fist. His eyes were on the water. His entire being was enraptured with the beauty of it.

Or so it seemed to me.

When I looked back on it later, I think this was the precise moment I lost him.

## Two days ago

I DIDN'T SPEND the night on the cliff. Instead I went back to my house and paced around the rooms, wondering what was going to happen the next day. Several times I began to pick up the phone to report what I had seen, but I always put it back in its cradle. I had this peculiar notion that the man was nobody's business but mine.

I did not sleep well and woke up hours before the sun and prepared food for him. I got cheese and jerky, some biscuits and boiled eggs and put them in a basket and headed back to the cliff. The air was chilly but there was little wind. The sea sounded calm. I sat near the place where I had been the night before. When the sky lightened up enough, I looked over the edge. The man was not there. I waited. Seagulls called out, filling the air with sadness. Sometimes the cries of gulls make me think of my son. He loved seeing them. Would chase after them sometimes. I knew he wanted to leap off the edge of the cliff and fly with them. Knew it from the time he was too young to walk.

As the sky grew less dark and the light of the sun began to paint the cliff, I saw the man poke his head out of his cave.

"Ahoy!" I called to him.



He looked up and waved. "Ahoy!" he said, and grinned. I was glad the wind had died down this morning. I could hear him.

"Did you sleep well?" I asked.

"Well enough under the circumstances."

"I have food for you."

"Oh good. You're too kind."

"Where are you from?"

"My barge was Vermont."

A small state, then. Or smaller than most. I made a note to tell my superiors.

"Why did you leave it?" I asked.

"No reason," said the man. "I wanted some adventure."

Well, I guess he found it. Rowing across the open ocean and ending up on this cliff. But I didn't quite believe him, either. Someone needed more than a sense of adventure to risk their life like this. Didn't they?

"What's your name?" I asked.

He had pulled himself completely out of his cave and was beginning to climb up toward me. I saw that he had a water bottle strapped to his back, but nothing else. Which means, unless he captured and consumed a cormorant or a seagull last night, he hadn't eaten in some time.

"My name is Clay," he said.

"I'm Susan," I said.

"Glad to meet you," he said, "in a couple of hours."

I pulled back from the edge. In a couple of hours? Sure. I was glad to have talked to him, but I still didn't know anything about him.

I went back to my house and called my contact.

"I have a visitor," I said.

"Visitor?" He sounded as irritated with me as ever.

"He's climbing up the cliff. He came from the land mass I reported earlier. Vermont."

"How do you know it was Vermont?"

"The visitor told me."

"Put the visitor on the phone."

"I can't. He's not here yet."

The voice on the line hesitated. "Don't waste my time," he said. And hung up.

I called him back. "Don't do that," I said. "I'm telling you the truth. He's climbing up the cliff and will be here soon."

Silence.

"Hello?" I said.

"We'll send someone out," said the voice. Then he hung up again. Fine. I was going to have assistance. But it would take a while for anyone to get to my house. I called some of the other lookouts along the cliff. I told them the situation. They were ecstatic. A visitor to our state. How marvelous.

Yes. Well. Maybe marvelous and maybe not.

I returned to the cliff and looked over. The man was much closer. He climbed with an efficiency and sense of purpose I admired. Even though I could see only the top of his head, I saw that he was a man of energy. He looked to be about the age my son would have been. Or maybe not. Maybe I was making him my son's age because I wanted him to *be* my son. The brain can do such strange things sometimes.

As he got closer to the rim, I slid over to the side. He gripped the edges of the rock with his fingers. I marveled that he did not

slip and fall, for if he did, he would surely have died, broken on the beach below.

As he got closer I heard his breathing. Powerful gulps of air. His clothes rustled in the silence. I thought of my son. How he had such strength and will so early in his life. How that will changed everything for us.

Clay put his hands over the top. His fingers touched grass and he extended his grip, then pulled himself up and over the edge and flopped down on the ground. He rolled over and stared up at the sky, then began laughing.

"I thought I would never make it," he said.

I walked over to him and stood with the basket of food. "Well," I said, "you did make it. Welcome to Washington."

He got up on his feet and tried to look serious, but the grin would not leave his face. He nodded to me and bowed slightly. "Very happy to make your acquaintance," he said. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"Not at all," I said. "Would you like some food?"

He took the basket with perhaps a little more force than he wanted to and opened it. "Oh my," he said. "I haven't seen cheese in ages."

"Really?" I said. I remembered from my grandmother's lessons that Vermont had been a cheese producer before the break up.

"The cows in Vermont all died a long time ago."

"Really?"

Clay nodded. He took up a piece of jerky and bit into it. He obviously relished it. "Vermont drifted into the arctic latitudes for a while. It was so cold for so long that most everything died. Animals, trees, even grass. We had no summer for years and there was no time to adapt. We have become very primitive. Much more primitive than before the break up. Then a few years ago the currents took us in a more southerly direction, but things haven't come back. No one knows if they ever will."

He sounded sad, telling me about his home. Was it all just random chance, what happened to one's home state? "I stand on the cliffs and watch for other states," I said. "I have never seen anyone leave their state to come to another."

"Yes, I would expect not," he said. "Not many do what I have done. Some, but very few."

I didn't tell him about my son. Instead I indicated the path back to my house. "I would be happy to let you stay at my place for a time," I said.

"That would be lovely," he said. He extended his arm to me and I took his elbow and we walked back to my house.

The seagulls and the ocean receded behind us. The sun warmed our path. Grassy fields extended all around us.

"Oh, this is lovely," said Clay. "I had no idea things were like this on other states."

"Vermont is not like this?" I said.

He shook his head. "Vermont has become a wasteland. We have very few people left. Those that remain are sick. I had to leave, you see. I had to know if other states were better off."

I found Clay's words somewhat disturbing. I had hoped that other states were as well preserved as Washington. I wanted to think that all of the states were thriving. Now it appeared this was not so.

We got to the house and I showed him to a small room in the



back where I had set up a small cot, anticipating that he would want to spend a night or two.

"I hope this is not too primitive for you," I said.

"Oh," he said. "Not at all."

"There will be people coming tomorrow."

"People?"

"I informed others. They will be curious. You will be something of a celebrity."

He seemed to consider this. It did not appear to trouble him, only to amuse him. "A celebrity? Well. I suppose I will need to study up on how I need to behave."

"I imagine you will just need to be yourself," I said.

"Excellent advice," said Clay. "I will strive for that."

He looked so tired. I wanted to ask him more about Vermont, but it looked like he could barely keep his eyes open. I told him he could rest as long as he wanted, then I closed the door on his room.

## After the funeral

I HAD NIGHTMARES that tore my heart to pieces. I saw my son go over the edge and fall to the ocean below, in slow motion. I reached for his hand. He reached for mine. We strained toward each other, but could never touch. Always out of reach and him falling. He never touched the water, but I could never save him either. We were in an in-between place where neither of us could do anything, an eternal limbo of futility, more frightening and soul draining than it would have been to see him smashed against the rocks below.

I always woke from such dreams with sweat covering my body and my heart thumping against my chest. I called for my son. Called his name and he came running into my room. Twelve years old. No time for bullshit, but still feeling duty bound toward his mother.

"Mom," he said. "You're dreaming again."

Yes. I was dreaming again. I wanted his father here. My husband.

"I'm okay," I said, in a shaky voice that conveyed the exact opposite.

"Was it Dad?" he said. "Were you dreaming of Dad?"

I was not, but how could I tell him I was dreaming of his prolonged death? Impossible.

"Yes," I said.

"I miss him too," he said. "But he's gone."

He had been gone for several months. No one's fault, not really. How could I blame anyone? He had been on the edge, peering out at the sea, catching sight of land. Another state floating in the distance. The air was wet with fog. He wanted a closer look. He stepped forward, a few steps too many.

I was there with him. I saw him turn in the air. Startled expression for one second. Less than that. An instant. Hardly long enough to catch each other's eye. Maybe we did. It's hard to remember now, hard to know what happened and what I merely *wanted* to happen. Then he disappeared. Simply dropped from view. I ran to the edge. Saw him cartwheeling in the air. Hitting the cliff. Not believing any of it. It didn't happen. Wasn't happening. I closed my eyes because I knew I didn't want the final

image in my brain. Kept them closed for a long time.

"Yes," I said to my son. "He's gone. But you're here."

He looked away. Ready to be gone. So soon? My son didn't want to be near me?

"I have breakfast," he said.

"I'm not hungry."

"You have to eat."

I made myself get out of bed. Four months since my husband's death, and I had not been to the edge. My son had been taking care of my duties, scanning the horizon, looking for land. Why? Who cared if there was land out there? All we had was this slab of rock, this thin crust of soil over frozen magma.

My son had laid out an impressive breakfast. He must have gotten up early. I felt a certain dread in my heart.

"What's this?" I said.

"You need to eat more," he said. "I made pancakes and sausage. You like sausage."

"Yes," I said. I sat at the table and picked at the food on my plate.

"Well," he said.

"Well what?"

"Aren't you going to eat any of it?"

"Why did you make this for me? You never make breakfast."

"I can make breakfast." Proud. Defiant? Maybe.

"I know you *can*," I said. "You just never *do*."

"I think you need to get back to your duties," he said.

"My duties?"

"Mom," he said, "you can't just spend your days wishing Dad was back."

I didn't. At least, I didn't think I did. I had the nightmares, yes, but that was nothing. Just grief. Completely understandable. I felt like I needed to be strong for my son. He had spent so much time with his dad. Well, they both spent time away from me. Lived for the edge. Abandoned me to the house and the chickens and the sheep if truth be told, but I never begrudged them each other. They were men. They needed each other's company.

And now that one of them was gone, the other was forced to find company with me. It was not a good fit. Not in any way.

"I can wish anything I want," I said. My own defiance. Defiance to my son. How ridiculous. And yet, how right it felt.

"I was thinking," said my son.

Here it came.

"Thinking?"

"That maybe I need to get away from here. For a while."

I had expected something like that. He was of an age when he needed to find his own way in the world. What was left of it.

"You want to go inland?" I said. "That's fine with me. You should see what our island state is like. It'll do you good."

He leaned back in his chair, scowling.

"What?" I said.

"I don't mean here, on Washington. I mean out there." He hooked a thumb toward the window, but he obviously meant more than outside the window. He was talking about the open ocean.

When your child decides to leave you, that is supposed to be a wonderful day, so I have been told. You've fulfilled your duty as a parent: you have given your child wings. I didn't feel wonderful at that moment. Or any moment since.



"You can't go," I said.

"I've already got a boat."

"But where? Where will you go?"

"What does it matter? I just want to get off this floating nothing."

"There are only other floating nothings. That's all the world is, a collection of floating land masses. Why risk your life to go to another when you have this one right here?"

"You don't understand," he said.

Of course. How could I? I wasn't a teenager anymore. I didn't have that yearning he had.

"You should find a girlfriend," I said. "That would cure this nonsense." I had in mind the daughter of another land watcher, just up the edge a bit. She would be perfect for my son. I would love to have her as a daughter-in-law in a few years.

"Mom!"

"What?"

"That's not what this is about."

"No," I said. "I suppose it isn't. I will never have grandchildren, will I?"

He looked disgusted. When did I begin to disgust my own child? "I don't ever want children. I don't want to raise them in this world."

"And yet, you want to see this world."

He had no answer for that. I had no follow up, no longer any desire to debate the point with him. Our breakfasts grew cold on our plates.

"I'm leaving today," he said.

"Fine," I said. "Do you have a proper boat?"

"Yes. I lowered one down the cliff already."

Ah. He's been busy then, doing more than looking out for rogue states. "Have you seen any other land masses?"

"Some."

"Can I come see you off?"

He hesitated. I felt an awful smugness at his hesitation, like I had won something.

"If you really want to," he said.

I wasn't sure I did.

## Yesterday

I DID THE arithmetic in my head. My visitor looked to be in his early twenties. Call it twenty-two, although he might have been even younger. My son left twenty-four years ago. Which meant he could have landed on another state, gotten married and had a son of his own within two years of his departure. Sure. It was very possible.

In the morning I peeked in on the visitor. He was still asleep. I studied his peaceful face for some sign of a family resemblance, but found nothing that suggested me or my husband or my son. I knew if I stared long enough I would begin to see family traits that weren't there, so I quietly closed the door on the visitor's room and went outside to take in the morning sun. It burned the air. It heated my skin, but not enough. I wanted it to sear me to charcoal. How could I think this man was my grandson? After all this time? How could I think that my own son had somehow survived to make a life and a family for himself?

Hope springs eternal. The curse of humans everywhere.

"Hey there, Susie." A male voice behind me.

I turned around.

It was Weaver, an edge watcher from up the coast, arriving on foot. I had seen him a few times, but mostly he stayed to himself, like most of the edge watchers. He must have walked twenty miles.

"What are you doing here?" I said.

"Heard about the visitor. Where is he?"

"Asleep at my house."

"Come on," he said "Let's go wake him."

I was reluctant to do so. I wanted to hold onto my fantasy a little longer. I knew a few well chosen questions would destroy the illusion I had so carefully constructed for myself. Weaver stood looking at me. He was old, like I was, and had that slow kind of motion to him, the way we get. The world too much for us. The whole heavy wheel of it crushing us down. But there was something else in him. An excitement, like maybe this visitor was some kind of salvation. Was that it?

"Okay," I said. "Let's go wake him."

"Have you been to any other states?" said Weaver.

We were all sitting at my kitchen table. Breakfast on plates in front of us. Clay eating like there was no tomorrow. I'd forgotten how much young people can put away. I wondered if I had served him enough.

"No," he said to Weaver. "This is my first trip."

Weaver sounded disappointed. "So you don't know anything about any other states?"

"A little. Some have visited Vermont. They have stories to tell."

I perked up. "My son took off a long time ago," I said. "Do you think he came to Vermont?"

"How long?" said Clay.

"Over twenty years."

"Don't think so," said Clay. "My dad told me we hadn't gotten visitors for a long time before the first one he remembers. What was his name?"

I told him.

"Doesn't ring a bell at all," said Clay. "Why did he leave Washington?"

I shrugged. "Why did you leave Vermont?"

"Indeed," said Weaver. "What made you leave?"

"I wanted to see the world."

"Washington isn't the world," said Weaver.

"It's a part of it," said Clay, suddenly sounding unsure of himself. I wondered if he wanted more than he found here. Did he think other states were going to be so much more grand than his own home?

"I think," I said, "what Weaver is trying to say, is what do you think of our little piece of the country?"

"Yes," said Weaver. "Now that you're here, was it worth it? Are you glad you left? It must have been a scary trip."

"There were some moments," said Clay. "The seas were rough. But you know, Vermont is nothing. It's just getting bleaker all the time. People who come to Vermont, they leave right away."

"Really?" said Weaver.

Clay nodded. "Oh, sure. They leave a desolate state and end up in Vermont and see it is no different and move on to another.



We've had visitors from Montana, Arizona, Ohio, and Colorado. All pretty depressing places now."

"But there's all kinds of states you haven't had visitors from, right?" said Weaver.

"Yeah. We figure those are the nice places. The ones that people don't want to leave."

"Exactly the conclusion I would have reached," said Weaver.

I listened and tried to take in the conversation, but mostly I had lost interest. None of this mattered, not really. We were still on Washington, and it still seemed like a perfectly acceptable place to be living. Why would anyone want to leave it? Why would my son?

We finished our breakfasts and then I showed Clay around my property. I was especially, and, in a way, ludicrously, proud of my livestock.

"This is fantastic," said Clay when he saw my chickens and sheep. "Vermont has lost so much. The animals, what few there are, don't thrive. Our crops are meager. I left partly so I wouldn't take resources away from my family."

I didn't say anything. Weaver remained silent as well. We walked more of the land. I hadn't done that in a long time. It felt good to stride over all that grass and dirt. I had a thought to kick off my shoes, but we were walking a long way. Clay and Weaver seemed happy to be walking too. In certain latitudes, we had an amazing state. Verdant and rich. We saw rabbits running in fields. A distant coyote. Clay saw it too and whooped at the wonder of it.

"We have nothing like that in Vermont. Not anymore."

"We've got bears here too," said Weaver. "Not a lot, but some. We kind of thought that maybe all the states still had wildlife on them."

"Nope," said Clay. "Some of the states are dying. They might not last much longer."

"That's sad," I said.

"Yes," said Clay. "Do you like it here?"

"It's my home," I said.

"I was hoping to go inland. Do you have cities here in Washington?"

"Some, but they aren't like they used to be. Mostly people too scared of the edge to live here. They think they'll fall off the world."

"They might," he said.

"You going to walk?"

"Is there any other way?"

"There are horses. Someone might lend you one, if you ask real nice. Otherwise, we're in a kind of mild area lately. It'll be a nice walk for you. Long, but nice. I'll show you the way to go."

"Thanks," said Clay. "You've been very kind."

We returned to the house.

Weaver fell into a chair in the living room. I sat in another near him. We expected Clay to sit with us. Instead, he went into his room and returned with his small backpack.

"What?" said Weaver. "You aren't going *now*, are you?"

"No reason to wait," he said.

I could tell he thought it was much too boring to hang around with a couple of old people. I wanted to feel offended, but could not manage it.

"I'll put some food together for you," I said.

Weaver was irritated with him. "You just got here," he said. "What's your damn hurry?"

Clay had no answer for him. He looked to me, as if he wanted my help. I remembered when my son used to look to his father when I told him to do something he didn't want to do. Such an understanding they had. His father sometimes helped him out, sometimes not. But the point was that they had something, some connection that seemed to be missing from me and my son. Now I felt a little of that with Clay. So strange. I wished he would stay in the house and help me with the chores. Do some work around the house. I'd cook for him.

I shook my head. Ridiculous thoughts.

"Let him go, Weaver," I said. "He's a young man. He needs to roam."

Clay's eyes softened toward me. A silent thanks that I appreciated.

A few minutes later he was gone. He waved to us as he rose over a hill and disappeared on the other side.

Weaver shook his head. "That was completely disappointing," he said.

I nodded. "Still, it's nice to have someone new in the state."

Weaver turned from the hill, disgusted. He kicked at a stone. It flew off the ground and arced up to land near the house, then bounced once and hit the wood of the house with a dull *thunk*.

"Maybe that's enough for you," he said, "but it's damned little enough for me."

## After he left

I WATCHED MY SON row across the sea. I didn't know where he was going and neither did he. We had been in calm waters for some time, so I was reasonably sure he would be safe for a while. How long, was anyone's guess.

How can I describe my feelings at the time? It's hardly possible. My son was alive, I could see him, but it felt like he was dead. Who could survive for long without a state under their feet? And what were the chances of him getting to one before his food ran out? Before he left he explained how he would catch fish for his nourishment. He had devised a way to gather evaporated water from brine to quench his thirst. Oh yes, he had planned the thing very well, as well as anyone who had never been to sea might be able to plan it.

The current grabbed his craft and took him in a direction away from Washington. Forty-seven other states floated in the void. One of them was to be his new home.

For myself, I had to learn to live in my own state. I turned my back on the sea, walked away from the edge, and went inland. I lived in a small village and learned to be around people again. It was, I decided, a good way to spend one's life. I forgot about my husband and my son, as much as was possible. They still lived in my dreams and still haunted my memories, but I made them into small figures, to minimize the hurt that they could administer to my heart.

Was this easy? No. It was difficult. But we do many difficult things in order to survive.

Still, the years went by and the edge called to me again after the painful edges of my heart had softened. I bid farewell to my



new friends in the inland village and returned to my house near the edge. It had become run down, of course, and needed a lot of care and work. I was only too happy to undertake it. The memories of my husband and son became happy ones. They haunted the house and I turned them into amiable companions.

I was prepared to let things remain this way. I watched the horizon, and made my reports. Washington drifted down to the southern latitudes so we had balmy weather and pleasant breezes for many years. It was a good time to be alive, even if I was alone most of the time. Sometimes I travelled to the houses of other lookouts. We would spend some time together, but it was never comfortable. Edge dwellers were not like the people I knew inland. They were awkward with company and always seemed like they wanted to retreat into themselves. Well, I could understand that. It's exactly what I wanted.

I kept my animals. Caring for them filled most of my days. And I made a garden. In the evenings I had books to occupy me during the hours before bed. Mostly books from before the break up. I liked the ones with pictures: seeing the world as it was then, the rivers filled with water instead of weeds. The cities with their amazing tall buildings. I knew the wreckage of Seattle, and Vancouver, and Olympia, and countless other cities remained in place, exactly where they fell, but who wanted to see those relics now? Much better to witness them as they had been, before the break up.

I looked for land, the other states floating by, because that was my job, my task. I saw them, occasionally, massive ghosts on the water, holding who knew what. Maybe robust populations. Maybe nothing but rats and weeds. But mostly I looked for him. For my son.

## This morning

WEAVER HAD GONE back to his house. I was alone again, which was a comfort in its way, but also a disappointment. Clay's visit was slipping from my memory. Had he really been here? It hardly seemed possible.

I fed the chickens, attended to the sheep. Circumstances change, but one thing always remains: the hunger of animals. It was the only thing that I could always count on.

Mid morning a tall man arrived on horseback, coming at a fair trot over the rise. I was suspicious at first. None of the watchers have horses. Horses are for travel and we don't do much traveling. But the man looked to be no one dangerous or violent, as far as I could tell. I went out to greet him.

"You Susie?" he said when I got closer. He was the voice on the phone. I had never met him before, but as soon as he spoke I knew he was. That clipped way of speaking. The condescending manner I could rely on.

"Who wants to know?" I said.

He rode up close to me. Not so close that he crowded me, but close enough to establish his dominance.

"I'm your boss," he said.

"Welcome to my world," I said.

"Where's the visitor?"

"Already gone inland. I'm surprised you didn't pass him. He went the way you came."

He looked around, then looked disgusted. Then he looked at me. "You should have kept him here."

"Why?"

"I needed to talk to him."

"You didn't tell me to hold him. Besides, he's bigger than me."

He looked back, to the hill he came over. "I passed no one," he said.

Clay was a ghost, then. No. It just meant he took a different path.

"You'll probably be wanting to get back to the hunt," I said.

"Search," he corrected me. "I'm searching for him, not hunting him."

"As you say. Do you want to come in for some food before you go?"

My boss, the man I had never met before this morning, considered the offer with great seriousness. I could see he was hungry. People are like animals, after all. They need food constantly. It is what defines us, in a way, the need to consume. Without it we are nothing. Is that a good way to understand the world? Perhaps not, but it is *a* way.

"No," he said. "Thank you but no."

"At least get off your horse," I said. "Give him a rest."

"No," he said again. "I need to find the visitor."

"But why? What is so important about him?"

"He's not from here," said my boss. "He knows things."

I could see he was agitated. I recognized the discomfort. We all wanted to think the world was more than it was. But we were mistaken and always would be. The world doesn't hold more than we see or more than we can imagine.

Vermont was a dying state. Clay was the only thing left of it and Clay only wanted to live on Washington now.

My boss's eyes blazed. They longed for the old world, the one before the break up. I had no idea the fire of the past burned in him like this.

"Come on," I said. "Let the past be, at least for a moment."

He slumped in his saddle, all the wind knocked out of him. I felt a tenderness toward him that I hardly knew was even possible for me.

He dismounted and stood on the ground next to me. Suddenly he seemed much more like a real person, like someone I could be friends with. We led his horse to a shady spot under a tree and I put out some water and hay for it. Then my boss and I went into the house for a nice meal.

"After we eat," I said, "I'll take you to the edge. Have you been there?"

"No," he said.

"You'll like it," I told him. "We can sit on the lip of the cliff, with our legs dangling over, and watch the ocean. I never tire of that. The ocean is eternal. It'll always be there. And that's something to be grateful for."

> Mario Milosevic's stories have appeared in Asimov's, F&SF, Space & Time, the online literary magazine qarrtsiluni, and many other publications, but this is his Interzone debut. He has also published some books, including Terrastina and Mazolli, and three volumes of poetry: Animal Life, Fantasy Life, and Love Life. He lives in the Pacific Northwest of the United States with his wife, writer Kim Antieau. He works in the local public library. For more information please visit Mario's website at [mariowrites.com](http://mariowrites.com).



**“A**RE WE GOING TO DIE?” ASKED LITTLE TIGER. HE BOUNCED on his toes and hesitated, knees bent, as the hook and eye soles of his boots nearly ripped free of the practice mat.

After three weeks, he still hadn't adjusted to low gravity. None of us had, but I'd hoped a child would adapt more quickly.

I forced a laugh. It echoed off the stainless steel spaceship walls instead of being mellowed by the elm floors and wool carpets of our temple. “What makes you think that?”

He made a face. “In the movies, Chinese heroes always die.”

I nodded. It was true. I distracted him by spinning in whirling horse stance, raining blows at his heart.

He ducked.

My own hook and loop soles tore free from the practice mat as momentum propelled me into space. I somersaulted off the opposite wall of the ship and touched my boots back down neatly on my side of the mat.

Little Tiger smiled his appreciation. The entire mat stood less than two meters squared. It was the maximum mat size I could fit in our ship lounge/dining room, by collapsing the main table. Shaolin kung fu could theoretically be practiced on a table top, but my balance still hadn't quite adapted to space.

I blinked, trying to force tears onto my desiccated eyeballs. As I sank into a crouch, I answered, “American heroes never die.” Then I spread my stance as if I were sitting on horseback.

Little Tiger was familiar with this move, but he didn't block my next blow to the ribs.

Instead, he soared into the air. At the last second, he tucked into a ball to avoid hitting a camera lens mounted on the ceiling. He pushed off just beside a porthole, flipped himself upright on the mat, and said, “We're not American.”

That truth, I couldn't block either. I attempted a handspring. I bounced off the console and had to twist sideways to avoid springing into the toilet. I launched back on my feet, on the mat, and said, “What makes you say we're heroes?”

Little Tiger laughed. But later, I caught him looking thoughtful again, and I left him with his sadness. Even an eight-year-old had to deal with exile eventually.

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THAT NIGHT, LITTLE Tiger sat outside my sleeping pod during my lying meditation. I had left the top open, but he knew better than anyone when I liked to be left alone. After I finished my practice, I rebuked him. Our sleep pods resembled sleep coffins. There was hardly enough room for my own 168-cm frame to stretch out. For sleep and meditation, I required privacy.

In response, Little Tiger peeled his space skin and orange sleeve back from his wrist. Finally, he unwrapped a homemade cotton bandage to reveal his forearm. “I am afraid.”

We practiced iron forearms together. This involved beating our arms with bars and hitting our arms against each other's every morning. I expected to see bruises on his arm. I did not expect a red rash surrounded by white scale, about the size of his palm. Its irregular border suggested it might be growing.

I frowned at him. I did not want to touch it, although this did a disservice to both of us. “Little Tiger. How long have you had this?”

He snapped his sleeves back over it. The faint odor of camphor and eucalyptus lingered in the air. He'd been medicating it himself. “About a week.”

Two weeks ago, I'd noticed our bandage stock depleting. I had assumed it was a usual injury and not pressed him. “Is it growing?”

# IRON

BY MELISSA



ILLUSTRATED BY JIM FURNES

A detailed illustration of a man in a white spacesuit with a clear helmet, climbing a complex metal structure in space. The man is looking towards the viewer with a determined expression. The background is a deep black space filled with stars. A large, white, circular object, possibly a planet or a large satellite, is visible in the upper left. The man's suit has a red stripe on the sleeve. The overall style is reminiscent of classic pulp magazine illustrations.

# MONK

## YUAN-INNES



His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. "Yes."

"Quickly?"

"Yes."

I surveyed him for other symptoms, but couldn't detect any. His eyes were still clear, tongue pink, appetite hearty, muscles taut and swift during our practice. He looked like a normal boy to me, and I had worked with many in the monastery. "Does it hurt?"

He lowered his eyes. It was answer enough. We did not discuss pain.

"I will make you a better bandage. But I will have to tell the doctor."

"No, Big Brother!"

I hesitated. We were not true blood, but he reminded me of our relationship. "We need help, Little Tiger. I don't know how to mend this. Maybe the ship physician –"

"I've been researching this on the ship computer. Please!"

Against my better judgment, I stopped. "All right." But I made a mental note to search the computer myself. All of our logs were sent back to the government. I would have to be cagey. Either the government or our shipmates might decide to kill one or both of us and throw our potentially diseased bodies into eternal space.

FOR THE MOST part, I avoided speaking to Moon, the ship's physician. She was equally respectful. Still, her scent reminded me of fresh-cut grass on an August afternoon. I dreamed about her long, black hair slipping between my fingers, and more than once, I imagined the lithe body under her space costume.

I was a monk, not a eunuch. I wondered if it was part of the government's torment to put me in such close proximity with two women.

The other woman didn't move me as much. She was a former Olympic swimmer, a gold medalist who became even more famous when she was chosen for a soup company sponsorship, but ended up telling people they should make their own traditional soups. She was fired, of course, and sent into space with us as an example of what it means to betray a corporation, as grievous as betraying the government.

I could hardly pronounce her name, Wynton. "After Wynton Marsalis, the trumpeter," she told us. She even played us some of his music, which was pleasant enough, but why would a family name their daughter after a black American man?

She was supposed to be in charge of the insect colonies. Instead, she knitted a scarf. "I can give it to the aliens," she said. "I think they would like a present, besides ourselves." She barked with laughter.

I thought she was more than a little crazy. However, since our purported mission to meet the aliens seemed even more insane, why not knit or adhere oneself to a ship computer, which was her other main activity? She probably found kung fu equally nonsensical.

So, if I had to, I could ask Moon or Wynton for help with Little Tiger.

Or perhaps Jigme. I had trouble understanding his accent, since he was a Tibetan who escaped to the US. He'd made the mistake of visiting his homeland after his mother died, just in time to be pressed into space service.

The only one I'd be certain to avoid was Hunan. From the beginning, I disliked him. He was fat, quite a feat with all the food shortages and further rationing in space. One of his front teeth was crooked. He was rich enough for cosmetic dentistry, so he kept it out of obstinacy. Strangely, I liked him the better for it. I wondered if that trait were at the root of his own exile.

"Do you practice Iron Crotch?" he asked me at a communal dinner.

I did not answer. This is one of the more misunderstood practices. 'Iron' means the area has been toughened through qi and practice to withstand great forces. Naturally, Hunan focused on the most intimate anatomy. I'd assumed he spent his countless hours on the computer doing politics or pornography, but perhaps teasing a monk amused him. I speared tofu with my chopsticks.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked Moon.

A hint of blush stained her cheeks, although she continued to chew her rice.

"I thought you might want to see," he said. He brought up an old video on the ship's lounge computer. We watched Master Tu Jin-Sheng and twenty-two disciples drag an airplane a few feet, using only their genitals.

Jigme swore. "Is it some sort of trick?"

Hunan guffawed. "Didn't you see the ropes?"

"It's about the qi," I said finally. "Those stunts are for publicity."

"You weren't one of the guys with your dongs strapped to the plane, then?" Hunan inquired.

I raised my eyebrows and said nothing.

Moon grinned. "You would have had to travel back in time. Wasn't that film from the early 21st century? You would have been a child."

"If this ship fails, maybe you could drag it around with your crotch," said Hunan.

"We all have our talents," I said, and walked away. I was still worried about Little Tiger. He hadn't come to supper.

IN ANSWER TO my knock, Little Tiger threw open the sleep pod case.

Hot, fetid air hit my face. He had turned his pod temp to maximum. Without greeting me, he cocooned himself in blankets and lay on his left side, turned away from me.

I sat on the edge of his pod. It was always cold on the ship, a dry, biting cold that woke me up with aching bones, dry eyeballs and coated tongue. Sometimes, I swore I could smell oyster mushrooms, even though I hadn't tasted them for over a year, before our imprisonment.

Maybe we were all going mad.

"It's psoriasis. Some sort of skin disease," I told Little Tiger's back. He hadn't shown up for breakfast or morning practice. Until now, I had never seen him voluntarily lying down unless he was asleep. I spoke faster. "Nothing to worry about. I'll ask the doctor for some skin cream."

After a long moment, he pulled back his sleeves. The rash had grown since yesterday, creeping on to his hand. The centre had turned purple and started to blister. It didn't look so much like psoriasis now.

"It burns," he said.



My head spun worse than during our first twenty-four hours in space. "I can ask for some pain cream too."

He rolled on his back. His hair had already grown out from its usual stubble. "I could kill myself."

"No." I surprised myself with the vehemence of my answer.

"It would solve our problems. I would still have my honor, and I wouldn't infect –"

I grabbed his shoulders. I could feel the bones through his clothes and space skin. My fingers tightened. I longed to shake sense into him.

He knew it. He bowed his head, resigned to it.

I dropped my hands. "Don't suggest it. Meditate. We will continue our training in the morning."

"Big Brother –"

"Not one more word. Walls have ears."

"Yes, Big Brother."

His flat voice cut me more deeply than a ceremonial dagger. He had given up hope.

IN 2018, ALIENS sent us a welcome signal from within our own solar system. The Chinese, the Russians, the Americans, and the Indians answered with a joint space mission to the asteroid belt. Those astronauts stopped answering central control after 184 days. China sent two more missions. All lost.

We were the fourth. In Chinese, four is considered an unlucky number because with a different intonation, it sounds the same as the word for death. Perhaps that was why they sent exiles instead of true astronauts. Or perhaps the other missions did succeed and they are sending us deliberately to the aliens for another reason. One never knows.

Hunan picked his teeth after dinner with a metal toothpick. "It's better than the old days. We could have died as peasants under Mao, or waited for a mock trial and a real execution where our families had to pay for the bullets. At least this way, we get to travel." He laughed at his own joke.

No one else did.

I knew the government. They would have sent a traitor, a government man, a mole, in with us. Even if death was a definite probability.

If the mole found out about Little Tiger's rash, we would die.

LITTLE TIGER BEGAN to grow fur.

I had stopped asking to see his forearm. In truth, I dreaded seeing it, even though it consumed my thoughts. So it wasn't until two days later that he unwrapped the bandages in front of me.

In the welt, he had begun to grow silky blond hairs. Nothing like the thick, dark hair covering his head, or the tiny fine hairs on his forearms. A different color, a different texture, and colors ranging from white to wheat to orange-brown.

It covered his inner forearm.

"I'm scared," he said.

"We're all scared," I admitted. I put my arm around him. My right arm. The one that didn't have a red, coin-sized welt growing on its forearm.

I SEARCHED THE computer database as best I could. Our rash sounded a little like Morgellons Disease, named by a Mary Leit-

ao, a mother and electron microscopist who described sores on her son's skin growing red, blue, black, and white fibers.

Most people thought she was crazy. One infectious disease specialist said she might suffer from Munchausen's by proxy, harming her son for attention. Some people claimed it was an alien disease sent from outer space.

Her son died without a diagnosis.

I knew I was not causing that rash on Little Tiger's arm. I would be very surprised if he caused it himself.

So perhaps he had this Morgellons. Or something entirely new. Or perhaps it really was an alien disease.

BEFORE I COULD speak to Moon, Jigme sat down to breakfast. As he poured water for his tea, I noted the new bandage on his right cheek. He lowered his eyes.

Hunan refused to eat beside him. "What is wrong with you?"

Jigme jiggled his right leg, a nervous habit that did not endear him to me, as I was sitting on that side.

Little Tiger's fingers strayed to his left arm, but he stopped them in time.

Moon said, "I am the physician. I will deal with it."

"Yes," said Hunan. "You've done such a good job so far."

This made me wonder, but Wynton spoke first. "That's enough, Hunan. Moon is a very good physician. I happen to know that she was first in her class."

Hunan snorted. "How many years ago?"

Wynton simply smiled. "Five."

Before Hunan could comment again, Moon spoke. "It's radiation sickness." She paused. "I have it too." She pointed to her right foot.

Little Tiger gasped. Radiation?

She frowned. "I've taken biopsies and looked under the microscope. Jigme and I have a similar inflammatory reaction. I spoke to command central, asking them to check our radiation shields. They told me everything was fine."

We were silent. No one trusted command central.

"Why would they send us out to the aliens with faulty radiation shields?" Hunan said finally. He sounded angry, but I could hear the fear underneath.

"I will check the shields," I said.

I SENT THE robot out to take pictures and a video of our space ship exterior, but the results were so grainy, they could have been celebrating the first manned space flight.

At this point, I didn't trust anyone else's eyes. I needed my own. I suited up as best I could. In addition to the usual skin designed to maintain my body volume, I wore the composite hard shell suit for extra protection. I checked the range of my arms, legs, and torso. I could move, but not with any sort of fluidity. I felt like an overdressed plastic doll.

Little Tiger said into the radio transmitter, "I will go. I'm smaller."

It was difficult to bend my head to look at him. I replied through the transmitter. "I am ready to go."

"I am more expendable." He meant his rash.

I shook my head. "I need you to control the computer. You are better at it." When our temple stopped training rich Westerners in Shaolin and demanded religious freedom for all, from Tibet



to Falun Dafa practitioners, Little Tiger helped design the web-site before we were shut down.

Also, a space excursion was as tiring for the muscles as a marathon on Earth, and Little Tiger had grown deconditioned.

Most importantly, I would never risk his life when I could risk my own.

He shot back, "Hunan and Wynton will control the computer."

"I need you to keep an eye on them." I stepped into the airlock. I wondered how regular astronauts felt when they surrendered to the darkness. If they experienced the same fear. I turned to Little Tiger and said, "Today is a good day to die." I wanted to remember him like this, his neat brown head, his eyes still bright with life, his body coiled for action even though he knew I would deny him.

We had studied all sorts of warriors, from Yue Fei to Shun Fujimoto, so he knew Crazy Horse. He smiled a little and said, "*Hokahey*," which is Sioux for "Let's do it."

The airlock sealed behind me. Five minutes later, I floated into space.

I fought panic. The vast blackness was the antithesis of home. Radiation. Emptiness. Silence. It was suffocation, death, my body spinning forever in chaos.

No.

I took deep breaths in and out. Emptiness was just emptiness. Death was just death.

I had a job to do.

Spaceship check. More specifically, the multi-pole electrostatic radiation shield.

Our main protection against radiation was based on elemental physics. A sphere on the crew module was positively charged, while two spheres on either end of the ship were negatively charged.

The positive sphere was easy enough to find, since it was taller and wider than Hunan. I took photos of its smooth, white, galvanized metal surface for further analysis, but to my eyes, it appeared intact and the magnetizer indicated the positive charge was distributed equally.

To make my way to the head of the craft, I had to 'walk' hand over hand with the guard rails. My muscles shook. The air in my suit smelled like Freon. I felt light-headed. Pinpricks of light danced in my eyes. No matter. I continued to 'walk'.

This sphere also checked out. I ran my magnetizer over the ship as I went. The numbers meant nothing to me, but the green light continually flashed 'OK'.

I climbed over the nose of the craft and continued down the opposite side with the magnetizer clipped to my suit. My right leg cramped. I stretched it out. I carried on. I had to climb past the lights and safety of the crew module and carry on to the tail.

*Hokahey*.

The magnetizer flashed yellow. Just once. I stopped, but it turned green again.

I moved more cautiously. It flashed yellow once, twice, and stayed yellow.

Warning. Caution.

Still, I continued 'walking' to the tail of the space craft. About a meter from the last negative sphere, the magnetizer turned red. DANGER, it said.

I ran the magnetizer over the sphere.

DANGER.

And then I saw the fissure where the sphere attached to the tail. Our magnetic shield had failed.

"CARRY ON THE mission," said the Leader of command central.

"You must understand, it is very unlikely we will fulfill the mission," Hunan said, with his most ingratiating smile. "If we are exposed to too much radiation, the ship may be able to carry on through autopilot, but we will not survive."

"I will send you instructions on how to fix the shield. Carry on your duties," said the Leader, and terminated the communication.

Hunan slammed his fist into the keypad.

The Leader did not reappear.

THAT NIGHT, HUNAN unveiled a jug. By fermenting soybeans, he had managed to concoct a mildly alcoholic beverage. He allowed us each a thimbleful. I declined.

"I want it," said Little Tiger.

I frowned, but it was not up to me to judge how he dealt with death.

Little Tiger swallowed his thimble and mine. He still had not shaved his head. He no longer looked or acted quite like an Earth.

Hunan downed his mug. "I'm not holding my breath for the repair instructions. They want us to die."

Little Tiger watched him with large eyes. Moon reached out to touch his shoulder, but he twitched away from her and asked, "Why do you say that?"

Hunan belched. "I'm not convinced the aliens exist. But if they did, and they wanted to study humans, our behavior and our DNA, our Leader has gift-wrapped our corpses for them. Who knows what he'll receive in exchange?"

"We're not dead," said Little Tiger.

"We will be," said Hunan.

"Why did you choose to come, if you knew you were going to die?" I asked.

Hunan gaped at me before he poured himself another mug. "I didn't choose to come. You think I want this suicide mission with a bunch of weirdos?" He belched.

This was what I couldn't understand. If he was our mole – and he was our most likely candidate – what motivated him? If his own death was certain, money was useless. "Did you take this position to help your family?"

"Maybe. But there's no help now. We're all going to fry here."

"Or not," said Wynton, entering the lounge with a smile. She brought up a blueprint on the computer.

I COULDN'T UNDERSTAND Wynton's repair work explanation, but Jigme and Hunan could.

"I used less materials than this when I was in Tibet," Jigme said, cracking a grin for the first time since we'd discovered the radiation sickness.

I didn't feel optimistic, especially since Jigme had lost some of his hair and begun to vomit. What if he vomited inside the space suit?

Moon had the same thought. "You could asphyxiate out there," she said. The concerned way she looked at him seemed more



than patient-physician care. It stabbed me in the solar plexus. I turned away.

Jigme shrugged. "Today is a good day to die."

I preferred that line when Little Tiger and I said it. At least we had spent our whole lives training our minds and bodies, not running to the United States.

And yet, even with my training, strange thoughts danced in my head when I entered the void outside the ship. Thoughts of letting go, of releasing my tether to the ship, of slashing my own space suit. Thoughts that didn't belong to me.

Still, I said, "I have experience out there. I'll go."

"This isn't kung fu," said Hunan. "I'll do it."

"You'll kill us all," said Jigme. "I'll do it."

Moon interrupted. "I know how to resolve this. Rock, Paper, Scissors. Ready?"

"He's DOING IT," said Wynton. She zoomed the camera on Jigme's hands. "He's repairing the crack. I don't know if I'll be able to generate the negative attraction, but at least this way, the sphere will stay adhered. He's almost – ahh!"

Jigme's body folded like a comma.

"Jigme. Jigme, can you hear me?"

"He's sick," said Moon. "I must go." She stood.

I blocked her. "You're our only doctor. I'll bring him in and finish the work."

"Stop him!" cried Wynton.

I thought she was referring to me, but while we argued, Hunan had already slipped into the airlock.

Little Tiger pressed the security alarm, putting him into lockdown, but Hunan gave us the finger through the camera and punched in a code. Somehow, he overrode the alarm.

I dove into my hard suit. While I pulled the helmet over my head, I heard Wynton yell, "No!" and I knew Hunan had already escaped into the blackness. I tethered myself to the crew module and launched into the void.

HUNAN CLAMPED JIGME's tow rope in his fist. Jigme himself floated in space, unconscious and unable to defend himself. Perhaps dead already. Still, I had to try.

"Give me his rope," I said into the transmitter.

"Why? You don't trust me?"

Instead of answering, I attacked him like an iron buffalo.

Hunan cried out, hands grappling the air.

I had already seized Jigme's waist with my legs. I yanked his rope free of Hunan's slackened grip and tied it to my own belt before I popped away toward a guard rail.

My aim was true. Practice. My hands landed on the metal. I lashed an extra tether to it and hurled us back to the crew module with a yank on my own anchored rope.

Ten feet before the airlock, I seized the extra tether with both hands. My gloves burned. My shoulders screamed. Jigme's weight made me somersault end over end, but we braked just short of the bulkhead. Safe.

I pushed Jigme into the airlock ahead of me before I slammed and sealed the door.

"You're a hero!" Little Tiger yelled.

Jigme crashed off the wall of the airlock. Some hero. I reeled him in using the tether. He was still unconscious. "I need Moon.

What's Hunan doing?" I asked.

Wynton's voice crackled through the transmitter. "Fixing the sphere," she said.

"I KNEW YOU'D take care of Jigme," Hunan said afterward, offering me another thimble of his tofu 'wine'. "That would leave me free to fix the sphere, which I wanted to do all along."

"But you're a traitor," I said. "Aren't you?"

He shrugged. "I look after myself. Frying to a crisp isn't looking after myself."

Moon reentered the dining quarters. "Jigme has aspiration pneumonia. I've aligned his meridians, started him on antibiotics, and added high-flow oxygen to splint his lungs. I think he'll make it."

Wynton beamed at her. "Excellent. Now we need to agree on our next plan. I've been working on the preprogrammed light sail controls. I think I can turn the ship around."

"Back to Earth?" Little Tiger blurted out.

She grinned at him. "Even if Jigme and Hunan did the world's best job repairing the sphere, I don't think it will hold out another two years. Do you?"

"No, but – you mean, we can go home?"

Her smile drooped slightly. "Our Leader would not welcome us. But we might be able to dock at the International Space Station as refugees."

None of us spoke. We could stay marooned in space for years, only to return to torture and imprisonment.

Hunan licked the wine off his lips. "I have another idea. I have contacted the aliens." He grinned into our stunned silence. "If I send them our blueprints, they might offer further advice, and perhaps materials, for the radiation shields. We could complete our mission to the asteroid belt."

"Why would they help us?" Wynton asked.

Moon's voice shook. Her cheeks had grown hollow, like a prematurely aged woman. "Who are these aliens? Why do they want to make contact with humans? What happened to the other missions?"

Hunan shrugged and smiled, still fatter than me and Little Tiger put together. "I'm happy to share my communication logs. You can decide for yourselves."

He could falsify the logs, but not aliens or materials for the radiation shields. Studying the crinkles of his eyes and his relaxed shoulders, I decided he told the truth. My mother used to say, "A crafty rabbit has three entrances to his lair." Hunan had probably built 300 entrances. I still didn't trust him, but his wiles might benefit us. This time.

Little Tiger's eyes dropped to his bandaged arm. No, we weren't going home. But we would write a fresh ending for ourselves, somewhere in what Magee's poem called the 'high untrespassed sanctity of space'. At this moment, we were still alive, and for me, that was enough.

*Hokahey.*

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**TUESDAY IS FREE DAY AT THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO**, and the revolving door never stops turning. The old black rubber seals on the door thump with a steady rhythm, like a giant heart, and each beat pumps more people into the dark and cool of the marble-floored lobby. Mothers pushing strollers; tourists in baseball caps; noisy gaggles of school kids. They stop for a moment, their eyes adjusting to the dark, then move to the information desk in the middle of the lobby to pick up a map or ask questions. They're here out of some sense of duty; they feel they ought to see this stuff, or show it to their kids.

A few people charge right through the lobby. They've been here before, and they've come back to commune with the masterpieces in the museum's collection. The look in their eyes is like that of lovers right before a rendezvous.

And then there's me. I usually breeze through the lobby too, but although I'm an art lover myself I rarely have a chance to visit my favorite pieces. Instead, I'm here to meet with the head of security, or survey a gallery for vulnerabilities, or inspect the alarm system. On this particular Tuesday, though, I was sitting on a granite bench, tearing the boarding pass from last night's red-eye flight into smaller and smaller pieces as I waited for the museum director to get out of a meeting. It wasn't like Harry to make me wait in the lobby. I hoped he hadn't called any of my recent employers.

that's what it looked like.

The giant heartbeat resumed its pace, and everything was as it had been.

I was still staring at the door when I realized someone was calling my name. "Mr Carnes? Mr Justin Carnes?" It was one of the gray-haired ladies at the information desk. She had her hand over the mouthpiece of a telephone.

I picked up my briefcase and walked to the desk. "I'm Justin Carnes."

"Mr Bennett says he can see you now."

The Art Institute's public spaces are all marble and granite, but after you pass through the door marked **EMPLOYEES ONLY** and climb the steps to the administrative offices it's like any corporation, with fluorescent light and little beige cubicles. At least the Director has an office with a door.

"Hey, Harry," I said as I shook his hand. "Long time no see." He was a little balder, a little grayer, but still whip-thin and, if anything, even more sharply dressed. His tie showed a guy in a 1940s suit sitting in an all-night café. It was a detail from *Nighthawks* – the original was downstairs, and worth millions.

I was suddenly aware that I was wearing the same suit as the last time I'd been here, six years ago, and it had been a little tired even then. I resolved to get a new suit as soon as I was back on my feet again, and hoped this job would be the one to do it.

# A PASSION FOR ART BY DAVID D. LEVINE

One of the uniformed guards spoke up. "Scuse me, miss, but there's no smoking in here."

My eyes turned automatically to the source of the disturbance: a tall redhead with porcelain skin and a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. Her dress was a vivid burgundy, and she had an extravagant broad-brimmed black hat with a white scarf for a hatband. Her eyes were brown, not green, but gorgeous anyway. Intense. She looked like one of those lovers right *after* her rendezvous. I was jealous of whatever painting she'd come to see.

She held out her hands, fingers spread wide, and said, "I'm not smoking."

"Sorry, miss, I thought I saw..."

"Well, you didn't. Excuse me." She resumed walking toward the door.

Now I saw what the guard had seen – a wisp of smoke right behind the redhead – but there was no cigarette in her hands or in her mouth, and no smell of tobacco. Was it smoke at all? It looked funny, more like a tangle of fine wire than a puff of smoke, and it moved funny too. Not drifting. More like it was keeping pace with her.

Then a crazy thing happened: she held the revolving door for a moment so the smoke could get in along with her. At least,

"Thank you for coming on such short notice. How was your flight?"

"Not bad. Why'd you keep me waiting in the lobby?"

Harry closed the door. "This is a tricky situation. The Chicago art scene is a pretty small town, and if anyone finds out about this vandalism before we have it under control I'll have a hell of a time retaining my donors. I was meeting with one of them when you arrived... You remember Carol Pirie?"

"Yes. And I'm sure she remembers me, and why I was here the last time." I'd been called in after a series of burglaries in Europe, to assess the Art Institute's security. She and I had had some rather heated discussions about how much the changes I'd recommended would cost.

"Exactly. I can trust my staff to keep your presence quiet, but if she saw you, she'd know right away we had some kind of security issue. It's the same reason I can't call in any of the local specialists."

"I was wondering why you'd bring me in from Seattle for a little vandalism problem."

"It's not so little." The phone warbled, and he held up a finger to me as he answered it. "Bennett." The voice on the other end went on for a while, and as he listened Harry scrunched up his face



and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Damn. Close the gallery immediately. I'll be right there." He put down the phone. "It's happened again. Come with me."

Harry's face was tight and his steps were hard and fast as we walked past display cases of furniture and guns. Empty suits of armor stood straight, like the ghosts of dead security guards. As we passed one helmet, displayed at head level in a glass case, I saw my own face reflected for a moment in the darkness of its raised visor.

We arrived at the Drawings and Prints Gallery as the guards were shooing out the last of the patrons. Leo Pirelli, Harry's head of security, took us down the gallery to an artwork that hung in a very simple frame with no glass. It was a work on paper, with a few pencil lines around the edges. The middle of the paper was blank.

"This is the damaged piece?" I asked.

"Yes," Leo replied.

"It looks OK."

"It used to be a pencil sketch of a ballerina by Edward Moy," Harry said. "A minor twentieth-century artist, but one of my favorite pieces in this gallery. The expression in her eyes was priceless. Dammit!" He turned around, clearly pained by the sight of the damaged drawing. "Now it's gone, like the others," he said. "Erased."

"I thought the others were oil paintings."

"Two oils and a watercolor. But just like this, the central figure was removed, leaving the background and the canvas intact. Not a molecule of paint left behind, and no trace of any caustic chemicals."

I peered at the bottom of the frame. There were no eraser crumbs, no paper dust or graphite. The paper in the middle looked the same as the rest of it except for a few faint creases, maybe where the pencil lines had been. "How did he do it?"

"No idea. We thought at first the pieces were stolen, replaced with blanks as some kind of rude gesture. But the canvases and the remaining paint tested out as authentic. Bad enough if they'd been taken. But this...destruction!" He grabbed me by the shoulders, his lean fingers digging into my flesh. "You've got to stop it."

"I'm your man." No fuck-ups this time, I told myself. This is your last chance.

"Are you going to dust for fingerprints?" Leo asked me.

"Nope. You want to catch the bad guy, call a cop. My job is to stop him in the first place." I hoped I could do it.

Back in Harry's office, we went over the situation. This was the fourth damaged work in three months. In every case the damage had occurred on a Tuesday, during open hours. The vandal worked fast; after the second incident they'd put the floor guards on fifteen-minute sweeps, and it hadn't helped. The motion detectors were no use during the day, and though they had video they didn't have 100% coverage and none of the incidents had been captured on camera.

"You've got to have proximity sensors. Get an infrared system like the one they have at MOMA. You can't even see it, but you get an audible alarm if anyone gets within three feet of the art."

"You said the same thing last time. And I'm telling you now what I told you then: I don't want to keep the public away from the art. That's not what this museum is about."

"You have a responsibility to protect these works for future generations. You've said so yourself."

He puffed out his cheeks. "Look. You know *American Gothic*?"

"Guy with the pitchfork, and his wife? Yeah. I've seen it a thousand times."

"She's his daughter, and you've seen reproductions."

"I've seen the original too. It's right downstairs. It looks just like its pictures."

"Yes, if you're three feet away from it. But if you get close, you can see the brush strokes, see the places the artist changed his mind and painted something out. You can see that it is a hand-made thing, not a photograph and not a print. To see an original painting is to meet the artist. But if you're too far away it's more like seeing the artist on TV."

"And if the vandal got close before you did, you get a nice view of a blank canvas."

There was poison in his stare, but he knew I was right. "OK, get me a quote. We probably can't afford it anyway."

"I know exactly who to call. And here's something you can do right away: make the patrons check all hand-carried items. I don't know how the vandal is doing it, but whatever he's using has to take up *some* space."

"We're already stopping everything bigger than a handbag, and they're bitching like crazy about that. If I set the filter any tighter the complaints will go through the roof."

"Your choice."

"I'll ask Leo if we have the staff for it."

We discussed a few more options, and my fee. He wanted me to stick around for installation and shakedown of whatever system we agreed on, and he was willing to pay for a month of my time plus a per-diem. The thought of a month away from home made me itchy, but it's not as though anyone there would miss me, and if I could make a good impression here it might wash the taste of my previous failures out of a few mouths on the West Coast.

That was Tuesday. By Friday I had a badge, a cubicle of my own at the Art Institute, and a room at the Stockton Inn – it was a little shabby, but every dollar I didn't spend from my per-diem was a dollar I could put in the bank. I also had Harry's grudging consent to install proximity alarms on some of the most valuable pieces, provided I could keep the cost down. "It's like taking a shower with a raincoat on," he said, "but if it keeps the vandal away it's worth it."

I threw myself into the project. I called in every favor I had in the Midwest. I skipped meals. I regularly worked until two or three in the morning, got four or five hours' sleep, then did it again the next day. But after two nightmare weeks, the system was installed and running. Harry caught a lot of flak from donors and the general public, but you can't please everyone. I started getting more sleep, working on fine-tuning the system and getting the bugs out, and feeling pretty good about the way the project had turned out.

A week after that, *Pocahontas* vanished.

Despite the proximity monitors, despite the bag checks, despite the increased staffing on Tuesdays – despite everything I had been able to think of to prevent it – a life-sized 400-pound marble sculpture of a half-clad young woman had somehow been removed from its base. There was nothing left except a pair of smooth depressions where its feet and legs had been.



The one bright spot was that the sculpture gallery was under video surveillance.

Harry, Leo, and I were crammed around a tiny black-and-white TV screen in a basement utility closet. "When did it happen?" I asked Leo.

"Between 2:15 and 2:25," he said.

"Ten minutes?" I shouted, not caring that it made him wince. "That's impossible!"

"LaTosha told me she swept that gallery at 2:15, and she's one of my best people. I know she called in the incident at 2:25."

"How could anyone chisel through half a foot of marble in ten minutes?"

"I hope we're about to find out," said Harry. The numbers in the corner of the screen flickered from 14:05 to 14:10 and Leo pushed PLAY.

We watched nothing happening for five excruciating minutes. It had been a very light day and there was only an occasional patron. *Pocahontas* stood, cool and serene, in the upper left corner of the screen. At 14:17 we saw LaTosha pass through, jerky and gray as an old movie. Leo said, "See?" but I just gnawed at the lip of my foam coffee cup. Then at 14:21 a woman came in and stopped in front of *Pocahontas*. She wore a light-colored broad-brimmed hat with a dark scarf for a hatband, a long trench coat, and sunglasses. She seemed familiar, though I couldn't yet place her.

The woman stood in front of the statue for a long time, three minutes by the clock. Her posture was not the usual contemplative stance you see in museums – it was more like the way you stand when you're talking with a friend. Her hands moved like she was talking, too, though we couldn't see her mouth.

Then *Pocahontas* turned her head.

None of us said a word, though I heard a crinkling and a splashing. Later I found I'd crushed my coffee cup and burned my hand with the hot coffee, but at the time nobody noticed.

The woman reached up her hands, gently beckoning, a young mother urging a child to take her first step. The statue reached out her hands to meet them, and stepped off her pedestal lithe as a faun. Then both of them looked to the left. "That must be when the proximity alarm went off," I said. There was no sound on the tape. The clock read 14:24.

The woman and the statue hurried off the top of the screen, hand in hand like a couple of sorority girls running from some prank they'd pulled. "Sonofabitch," Leo said. The ladies' room was right around that corner.

LaTosha came in from the left less than thirty seconds later. She immediately put her radio to her mouth and turned in a circle, looking in every corner of the gallery. Two other guards came in a minute later, and the three of them split up to search the gallery and the adjacent ones. Another couple of minutes and Leo showed up, then Harry and I.

While our grainy black-and-white images stared stupidly at the empty pedestal, a tall woman with a dark dress and light-colored hair came out of the bathroom. She was holding the hand of a shorter woman with a trench coat, broad-brimmed hat, and sunglasses. No shoes. And very pale skin.

"Right behind our backs," Leo breathed. "The bitch walked out of the museum right behind our backs." I didn't know if he was referring to the woman, or the statue.

"I've seen her before," I said. "I saw her in the lobby on my

first day here."

"The day the ballerina vanished?" said Harry.

I thought about why she'd come to my attention. The wisp of smoke that didn't look or move quite like smoke. More like a scribble in the air.

Or a set of pencil lines pulled from their paper.

"I think I saw that ballerina walk out the front door," I said.

We went back to Harry's office and opened a bottle of wine. I would have preferred something stronger.

"It's time to call the cops," I said.

"No," said Harry. "The video's not clear enough for a positive ID. For another thing, they'd never believe it."

"Hell, I don't believe it," said Leo. "I figure the crew from *Candid Camera* is laughing at us right now."

"I would be so happy if that were the case," said Harry, "because then we'd get the missing pieces back eventually. But my gut tells me this tape is for real. And a big part of that is what you said you saw in the lobby." He gestured at me with his plastic cup.

"I'm not going to swear to you I saw a pencil sketch walk through a revolving door. But I think that might be what I saw."

"If it turns out you're with *Candid Camera*, I'll kill you," said Leo.

"*Candid Camera*'s been off the air for years," I said.

"So what do we do now?" Harry asked.

I ticked off points on my fingers. "One, double the guard on Tuesdays. Two, focus security on artworks with full human figures, especially women."

"Not just women," Harry said. "The third piece to go was a Dutch burgher."

"OK," I said, "all human figures. And three, I personally will watch for the redhead. I'm the only one who's ever had a decent look at her."

"What will you do if you spot her?" asked Leo. "If we can't show this tape to the cops, we have no good reason to detain or eject her."

"I want to talk to her. I'm hoping we can get the heart works back."

We stared at each other for a while, then Leo said, "I don't know about you, but I'm going home for the day." We all agreed that was a good idea.

On my way out of the building I detoured back to the sculpture gallery. I stared at the empty spot where *Pocahontas* had stood, now occupied by a card saying it had been removed for cleaning, then at the nearby bust of *Zenobia* by the same artist. I studied that blank-eyed white face for a long time. What would she say, if she could speak?

As I turned to leave, I noticed a star-shaped crack in the flooring. And another, about three feet away. And another.

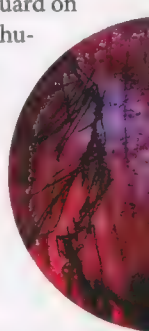
The footprints of a 400-pound person with very hard feet.

I shuddered and left the museum.

We hired more staff and shifted the proximity sensors around. The following Tuesday I camped out in the lobby all day. The redhead did not show. No more artworks were damaged. And that was the end of my month.

Harry managed to scare up the funds for another few weeks of my time. "That's all I can spare," he said. "I wish I could promise to keep you on until we get to the bottom of this, but I can't."

I spent the next week debugging and fine-tuning the proximity system. I *had* to get this job right. But the system vendor had





done a good job and there wasn't a lot to do. I wound up hanging around the galleries a lot. Wondering. One night I came back to the museum after dinner and sat with the paintings until after midnight, slowly draining my daddy's silver hip flask.

What does she see in you? I asked them. What do you see in her? Does she coerce you to come with her? Or is it what you've always wanted?

The cold, rational farmer in *American Gothic* stared out of the painting back at me, straight as his house. He would never leave his frame. His daughter, I thought, might go with the redhead – if she would ever take her eyes off her father, which I doubted.

Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Seated in a Bathtub* had some things in common with *Pocahontas*, I thought. But she had a slightly annoyed expression on her face, as though she were displeased that the artist had interrupted her at her bath; she would not be likely to take up the redhead's offer to go for a stroll.

It was the four characters in the diner of *Nighthawks* that worried me the most. They seemed so isolated, so desperate, so lonely – they would leave in a heartbeat, if she asked. No doubt they thought of themselves as hard-bitten and independent, but I could see they really craved companionship. Why else would they have come to this bright place on a dark street in the middle of the night?

Maybe they were security consultants who didn't have a soul in the world to call a friend.

I stared and paced and fidgeted away the days, and then it was Tuesday again.

9:30am. I'd been lounging casually on a bench since half an hour before opening, watching the revolving door, hoping and fearing I'd see the redhead. Whenever I thought about talking with her I got a feeling like a high-voltage wire – it raised the hairs on the back of my hand, and worried me that if I touched it I wouldn't be able to let go. How did she do what she did? How could I stop her? How could I get the vanished

artworks back?

Then the door thumped and she was there.

I knew her right away. She had the intense brown eyes I remembered from the first day, and her walk had a grace that even a jerky black-and-white security video couldn't obscure. Today the hat was hunter green, the dress white.

"Excuse me, miss, could I please have a word with you?" Those were the words I'd rehearsed over and over in my mind. But somehow I couldn't get them out. Instead, I stood up from my bench and watched as she strode, heels tock-tocking on the marble, into the museum.

I followed her. I heard a hum of high voltage, or maybe it was just the lights.

She wandered through some of the ground-floor galleries, up the grand staircase, through the hall of architecture, and through the glass doors into the first gallery of European paintings. Though the museum was nearly deserted, I was sure she hadn't noticed me following her – she was too intent on the art.

I watched through the glass as she stopped in front of the painting that dominated the space: *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte – 1884*. This massive painting – seven by nine feet – was composed of millions of tiny dots of color. It was world-famous, priceless. And she was looking at it the same way she'd looked at

*Pocahontas*. Like talking to a friend.

She was talking. I could see the edge of her jaw moving, though I couldn't hear what she was saying.

The painting began to shimmer like a hot day, like running water. The large female figure on the right side seemed to stir.

"No!" I shouted, surprising myself, breaking the spell that had held me still. But it didn't affect her – she hadn't heard me through the thick glass. I pushed open the door, shouted "Stop!" and she turned. Her eyes burned with an impossible brown radiance, and I watched her face slip from rapture to pain to horror to hatred all in one sick moment.

"Aaah!" she screamed, a beautiful voice drawn over a sharp edge, then "No!" – anger trailing off to sobs – as she turned away from me back to the painting.

The woman in the painting was half-torn from the background. A smear of tiny colored points splattered across the surface. Bare canvas was visible here, a mix of colors the artist had never intended there. Her face, once so composed and serene, was frozen in a distorted rictus of agony.

"You've killed her!" the redhead screamed at me, her voice as ragged and distorted as the painted figure, and she ran past me and down the stairs. I couldn't move for a moment – my eyes felt stitched to the ruined masterpiece – but then I ripped myself away and stumbled after her.

Her sobbing echoed among the severed finials and gargoyles in the hall of architecture as she ran down the stairs. She got to the bottom of the stairs before I hit the first landing. "Stop her!" I managed to shout, but none of the guards was quick enough and she reached the revolving door.

Out into the sunshine. I saw her getting into a taxi on Michigan Avenue. There was another one with its light on right behind it, and I shoved a tourist out of the way and fell into the back. "Follow that cab!" I shouted.

"You're shittin' me," said the driver.

"I'll give you a thousand dollars! Just follow that cab!"

"A thousand?"

"Anything! Just go!" I pounded on the thick plastic divider with both fists. "Go go go!"

He went, as only a Chicago cabbie can.

As the cab hurtled through a kaleidoscope of streets it all came down on me. I'd fucked up again. It was worse than the Frye – at least there the stolen prints had eventually been recovered. But *Sunday on La Grande Jatte* was ruined, maybe beyond repair, and they would never get that huge painting off the wall before someone saw it. And I'd let it happen. This was the end of my career.

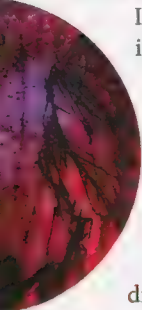
"There it is, man. She's gettin' out." The cabbie pointed to where the other cab had pulled over in front of one of those stolid little brick apartment buildings that Chicago was so fond of. He swerved across two lanes of traffic and jerked to a stop half a block behind it, then grinned at me through the scarred plastic. "That'll be one thousand dollars."

I shoved everything I had in my wallet through the slot. "Here's what I've got. It's a couple hundred."

"You said a thousand!"

"Here's my watch too!" I left the cab, ran down the block and up to the door. An old lady with one of those wire shopping baskets on wheels stared back at me through the glass.

"I'm looking for a redhead!" I shouted. "Tall! Brown eyes!"





The woman recoiled, hurried away down the hall with a glance over her shoulder. I saw my crazed reflection in the glass and realized I wouldn't let me in either.

I took three deep breaths and looked over the names on the mailboxes: G. CZNOWSKI; K. BRANWITZ; O. JUAREZ. But there was one that was written with a calligraphy pen, not punched out with a label maker: TITANIA. I pushed the buzzer.

"Hello?" It was her voice. Strained through a battered brass grate, tired and ragged and beaten, but definitely her voice.

"Miss Titania? My name's Justin. I saw what happened at the museum this morning. I want to talk with you."

"Leave me alone."

"I promise I won't hurt you. I promise I won't tell anyone. I only want to talk."

"Go away!"

"Please let me in. I just want to know... I just want to know what you said to her. To make her come out of the painting."

A long pause. Then a harsh buzzer sounded. I pushed the door open before she could change her mind.

When I found her door she was peering out over the chain. As soon as she saw me her face bunched in anger. "You!" she shouted, and slammed the door.

"Yes, it's me," I said to the door, loud enough to be heard through it but as calm as I could muster. "I'm sorry I interrupted. I should have said something sooner than I did."

"You said you wanted to know what I said."

"I do. How do you do it? What do you see that nobody else can see?"

She started to sob. "Jesus." The door opened enough to show her face again. "I've never been able to talk with anyone about it. But you've seen it. You know."

"Yes. Can I come in?"

She hesitated. "You said you won't tell anyone."

"Promise." The door closed. Then there was a rattle, and it opened again.

The apartment was small, its walls dense with paintings, posters, and prints. Stacks of canvases lined up against the walls, and easels with works in progress stood in several places. There was an odor I couldn't identify, not unpleasant – oil paint?

Sitting on the sofa, denting it deeply, was Pocahontas. She was wearing a loose smock over her marble skin. The angle of her head indicated she was watching me intently, but it was hard to tell with her pupilless eyes.

A dark, wrinkled man stood near the window. Light came through cracks in his skin, his clothes, showing that he was hollow – a thin skin of oil paint and nothing more. He crinkled slightly as he moved. He said something I couldn't understand. Dutch? The redhead – Titania – responded, hesitantly, in the same language and he seemed to relax a bit.

And there, barely visible where she stood before a blank canvas, was Edward Moy's ballerina. Now that I knew what I was seeing she looked less like smoke than a loose ball of fine gray wire. She moved smooth as a swan.

There were others.

"How?" I managed. "Why?"

"You have to have...a passion," Titania responded. "Really care about them, as people...more than anything else in the whole world. I've tried and tried to explain it..."

"You know you shouldn't do this! These...people...were meant to be shared. That's why they were in the museum."

"I can't help it. When I really get to know them, when they get to know me, they just come." She started to sob. "I told Marie – the woman from *Sunday* – about the sailboats on Lake Michigan. She wanted to see them."

"Maybe you can put them back."

"Back!" she shouted, sadness flaring to anger again. "Would you go back to the museum if you knew you could never leave?" The dark man trembled from the force of her emotion, tiny flakes of paint drifting down to the hardwood floor.

"This world wasn't meant for them. How can they survive out here?"

"They can't!" Her eyes were an onslaught. "Mijnheer Vander Ploeg is falling apart, and Suzette is unraveling. Pocahontas is already getting slow and unresponsive. They never last more than a few months."

"They could have lasted hundreds of years in the museum!"

"I'd rather see butterflies flying for a summer than pinned under glass forever." She took a step toward me, and I stepped back. Then another. I bumped up against an easel – the blank canvas I'd seen Suzette standing in front of earlier. "Would you rather be alive for a month, or dead for a hundred years?" She pushed closer to me, her face filling my vision.

"Please! Bring them back! Before it's too late."

The whole world was her eyes, her mouth. "You're the same as my professors – the same as everyone else in the Art Establishment. Dead artists! Dead art! That's all you care about!" Her eyes glowed brown and I felt myself drawn into them. "Real art wants to live."

It was true. I thought of my *Nighthawks*, how desperately they must crave companionship, how much they feared the loneliness of the darkness beyond their bright café.

The loneliness of a man who has failed. Whose career has ended. Who hasn't a soul to call a friend in all the world.

I let myself fall into the infinite depths of those luminous brown eyes, and into the blank canvas behind me.

THE FIRST DAYS after that were the worst, watching helplessly as Titania hurriedly packed her possessions and cleared out the apartment, leaving me to be found by the police. They kept peering at me out of the corners of their eyes, as though they could feel my gaze upon them.

I spent a long time in an evidence locker. Eventually I was sold at auction, and I wound up in a small private collection in Oak Park, the slightly famous souvenir of a case that was never solved. Here I am admired, even appreciated. It's not a bad existence.

Though apparently the expression frozen on my painted face is rather disturbing.

> David D. Levine has sold many short stories and has won the Hugo Award for Best Short Story, the Endeavour Award, Writers of the Future, and the James White Award (for 'Nucleon', which was then published in *Interzone*). He is an as-yet-unpublished novelist, and part-time cat substitute. He lives in Portland, Oregon and once portrayed a severed head in a musical comedy. In January 2010 he spent two weeks at a simulated Mars base in the Utah desert. David has a website at bentopress.com.



**A**LL MORNING CRISTINA DE ANE BATTLED HER MULE as they plowed furrow after furrow of stinking black dirt. This was Crista's first time working the wheat field since the attack and Eggbeater took full advantage of her injured body, continually stopping and starting, turning left or right, and destroying every attempt to plow a straight line.

As the cool spring morning warmed to day, the mule finally refused to move, pushing Crista's lupine rage too far. She screamed at Eggbeater, who brayed with laughter, causing Crista to kick the ceramic plow in disgust with her lame right leg. Embarrassed, she glanced around the field – praying no one had witnessed her outburst – only to see Beuten Pauler walking along the nearby road. Beu waved, the fool acting for all the world as if they were still best friends.

*Rip his throat out. Split his guts and spine.*

Crista gasped as the wolf surged in her thoughts. She fell to her knees – fingers gouging dank, plowed earth – and spun into dreams of chasing Beu down and tearing him to blood and meat. She wanted Beuten Pauler to pay for what he did. Wanted him to roll in pain, to scream for forgiveness. But she knew if she lost control, she'd be little better than him.

Breathing deep to calm herself, Crista grabbed the plow handles and pulled herself back up. She glared at the road, daring Beu to pretend any friendship still existed between the two of them.

But Beu was already gone. Instead, a deadly flash of red danced along the road, coming to a stop right beside the field.

Crista froze, only to be jerked forward as Eggbeater chose this moment to move. She cursed the mule and yanked the reins, but by the time she looked back the red had disappeared. Crista gripped the reins with suddenly sweaty palms. Was it a plague bird?

The mule, sensing her fear, brayed nervously. Crista pulled a carrot from her pocket and fed it to Eggbeater to quiet him, then stood on the plow for a better look. Her lame leg shook with pain, and she gripped the plow's handles to keep from falling.

The red flash was gone. Had it been an optical illusion? Or one of the rare unmodified cardinals which still nested in the nearby hills, their feathers as obscenely red as red could be?

# JASON SANFORD PLAGUE BIRDS

ILLUSTRATED BY DANIEL WINTER







Crista stepped down from the plow to unhitch Eggbeater. Perhaps it was nothing. Or perhaps it was a very dangerous thing hiding itself from her eyes. To be safe, she'd return to the barn.

Crista bent under the mule to unstrap his harness. When she looked back up, the plague bird stood beside her, waving a fresh carrot under Eggbeater's nose.

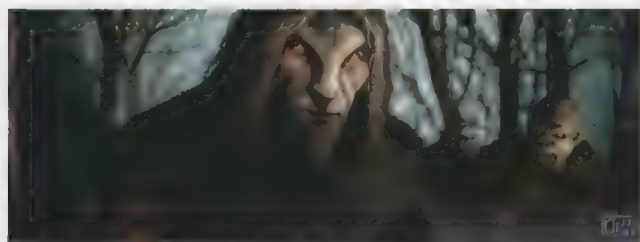
"Hello Cristina de Ane," the woman said. "I require a place to stay for a few days."

Crista couldn't speak. She stared at the woman's scary stock of red-burned hair, at the red line glowing from right eye to lips, at the twin red knives sheathed to her red trousered thighs. Most of all, Crista stared at the woman's pale skin. She could almost see through that paleness to the deadly blood screaming and cursing its way through her veins.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," the woman said in a tired voice, obviously repeating words she'd spoken many times in her travels. "My name is Derena. Now please, finish unharnessing your mule, and take me to your father."

The woman laid her hand on Crista's shoulder. Crista flinched and stepped back, causing her lame leg to spasm and dump her in the dirt.

A gentle smile splashed Derena's face as she reached out to pull Crista up.



NO ONE ELSE noticed Derena as she followed Crista and Eggbeater through the village commons – a fact which unnerved Crista, though she'd known this would happen. Last year at her 18th birthday party, the village's artificial intelligence had manipulated Crista's senses in a game of hide the kiss. She remembered standing before the young men and women of the village as Blue tickled her mind. Suddenly, she couldn't see her friends. She heard them step to her side one by one. Felt their unseen lips on her cheek as the villagers laughed and hooted. But she saw only empty air as she tried in vain to guess which invisible kiss belonged to which person.

If Blue could do that, so could the deadly AI this plague bird hid inside her blood.

Crista glanced at Blue's single-room school house. The rainbow lights and twinkling fog of the AI hovered protectively in front of the school while twenty kids of different ages kicked an old ball in a tangle of dust and shouts. Crista knew Blue saw the plague bird, even though the AI didn't react to the woman's presence. Crista wanted to run to Blue – to feel the cool, enveloping crackle of its energy across her skin. But the AI was forbidden to interfere with a plague bird's duties, so Crista simply led Derena on.

Crista's father repaired leather saddles and reins each day in the village barn, and sure enough, she heard him whistling inside. As Crista entered the barn, her father looked up from his workbench. "Let me guess," he said with a grin. "Eggbeater

performed his special circular plowing!"

Normally Crista would have laughed – they called the mule Eggbeater because he'd plow circles if given half a chance – but instead she ran around the workbench and grabbed her father's hand. His brown beard and stringy hair bristled as his wolf-anger rose. "Where's that son of a bitch Beu..." he began.

His words died off as Derena allowed him to see her. Crista's father nodded to himself. "Go raise the plague flag," he told his daughter.

"But only elders touch the flags."

"People will understand."

Crista ran as fast as her lame leg could manage to the giant flagpole in the middle of the commons. She opened the ceramic box at the pole's base, strung a red flag to the cable, and pulled it to the top of the pole so everyone would know a plague bird was here.

When she looked back down, the villagers and school kids who'd been milling around were running for their houses. Only Blue remained. As Crista limped home, the AI washed a wave of apology in and out of her mind – although what Blue needed to apologize for, Crista couldn't say.



THAT EVENING Crista sat on the wood stairs in her house, listening to the elders in the living room. Her father served as chief elder, and had invited the council to meet here.

"I want to know why a plague bird has appeared," boomed Ms Pauler, as always her deep voice overpowering her sapling-stick of a body. "It's been decades since a crime of merit occurred in our village."

"I wouldn't call your son's assault on Crista without merit," Crista's father said, irritated. "But you are correct – there's been no unpunished crime to warrant a plague bird's judgment."

The other elders nodded in agreement as Blue's haze of energy and lights twinkled from beside the brick chimney. "I remind you that plague birds also visit without cause," Blue whispered in their minds. "They keep a watch on all the villages as we AIs return people to humanity."

"When did one last visit?" Crista's father asked.

"Three years ago, although only I noticed him," Blue said. "Plague birds are extremely long lived, and visit our village regularly as they wander this land. Of course, the last significant visit we had was a century ago."

The elders grumbled nervously – that plague bird had killed a quarter of the village. Since then, every villager's education included experiencing the hell plague birds unleashed if capital crimes went unpunished. Crista remembered the first time she witnessed Blue's memories of those long-ago villagers. How the plague bird's AI tore their bodies to meat and bone. Blue had tried to stop the plague bird, only to have its consciousness ripped apart and painfully stitched back together, a clear warning that



the plague bird could have destroyed Blue if he'd desired.

*Fear. Scared scents. Mouths silent screaming.*

Crista closed her eyes to silence the memory. Crista smelled the elders' urine-tinged sweat, felt the nervous static from Blue, and knew everyone was reliving the same memories as she.

"Well, where is this woman?" Ms Pauler muttered.

"In our guest room, resting," Crista's father said. "She's exhausted. Perhaps ill."

Ms Pauler sputtered in anger. "She's staying in your house? What do you plan to do, beg her to kill my son?"

Crista scented the wolf rising in her father, and for a moment thought he'd attack Ms Pauler. Several elders growled as they sensed the same peril.

But instead of attacking, Crista's father calmed himself. "Tell them, Blue," he said.

"The plague bird intends to visit a hunter clan in the surrounding forests, and desires Crista to guide her," the AI intoned. "The plague bird also has an interest in Beu's attack on Crista – an interest we can do nothing to stop."

Ms Pauler's face blanched as Crista stood up to protest. She didn't want this so-called interest. She wanted the plague bird to leave her alone.

But Blue whispered in Crista's mind to remain quiet, so she did. That's when Crista knew she had less choice now than she did in the days and months after Beu's attack.



THAT NIGHT, CRISTA sat on her bedroom's window sill, her feet dangling over the two-story drop. Crista loved the night – all moon-glow and tangy forest scents and the urge to run howling after the hunt. Not that Blue and the elders approved of such base actions, although she was sure all the villagers had sneaked away at one time or another for just such a thrill.

Crista glanced at the flickering candle-light in the guest bedroom window beside her. The pressed glass showed only the room's empty bed and furniture, but Crista's instincts whispered that the unseen plague bird stood before the window, watching.

Suddenly, a familiar scent washed over Crista.

*Gentle kiss. Beu, muzzling neck. Mating urge. Woods so sweet in spring.*

Crista ignored the wolf's pleasant memories, instead growling a warning as she leaned forward on the window sill, ready to attack. Beu stepped from the dark trees a stone's throw from the house, his hands held up in surrender.

"What do you want?" Crista whispered. She didn't want to wake her father, who would likely kill Beu for being so near their home.

"I was passing by, and saw you on the window. Reminded me of good times."

Crista smiled as she remembered the spring night a year ago when they'd last met this way. She'd leapt from her second-story

window to chase him through the dark forest, finally cornering him beneath a fallen hickory. Crista sighed. She and Beu had been best friends all their lives, and she'd always believed they'd one day marry. When Beu kept control, he was a lovely man.

But the problem was that as Beu aged, his pox-gened tendencies worsened despite Blue's constant tinkering. Finally, last fall, he broke. He and Crista were walking around one of the wheat fields at night, holding hands and watching the clouds play slash and hide with the moon. Suddenly Beu attacked her. He smashed her face over and over and shattered her leg before catching himself, a gasp of horror in his yellow-glowing eyes.

The elders had restrained Crista's father for several days to keep him from killing Beu, while Beu himself said he deserved to die for his actions. However, the other elders decided against that punishment, reminding everyone the pox had gened Beu so badly not even the AI could make him whole. They branded his right hand, and warned he'd be killed if he lost control again.

Now Beu stood below Crista, seeking forgiveness for something she'd never forgive.

"Get out of here before my father scents you," Crista said. "You know what he'll do."

Beu nodded, bowing with a dramatic flair as he backed into the woods. A dark figure grabbed Beu and kissed him with a female growl before bolting into the dark. Beu looked sadly at Crista before chasing after the woman.

Crista wondered which village girl risked Beu again losing control. She tried to convince herself she no longer cared.

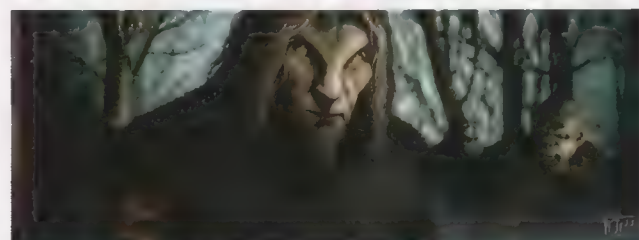
As Crista pulled her numb leg back into her room, she glanced a final time into the guest bedroom. The candle there flickered and disappeared as unseen lips blew it out.

Crista shivered. She realized Ms Pauler's fears were right. The plague bird was here to kill Beu.

As Crista fell asleep under her bed's warm quilts, she asked the wolf whether Beu's death would make any difference to the life she still had to live.

*Yes. No. Yes. Confusion.*

The wolf whined so much that Crista gave up her question, and simply joined it in running through the forests of her dreams.



WHILE ONLY A few hundred people resided in the village proper, over a thousand hunters lived in settlements throughout the nearby forests and hills. In the morning, during a breakfast of hot oatmeal, Derena announced that Crista would guide her to the Farnham settlement, one of the most secretive of the hunter clans.

Crista and her father exchanged nervous looks. "That's a long way for my daughter to walk on her bad leg," Crista's father said. "Plus, the Farnhams don't like outsiders."

"No one likes me," Derena said. "But we're still going."

Crista's father clenched his fists in irritation, struggling to



remain calm. He walked to a closet and returned with an ancient ceramic pistol. Crista reached for the gun – both honored her father would let her wear it, and nervous he thought it necessary. However, Derena said no. “She goes unarmed.”

Blood boiled her father’s face, and he literally shook. Unable to speak, he hugged Crista tight and stalked out of the house.

“He has good control,” Derena said. “I like that in a man.”

Crista turned away, not wanting to reveal how badly her own instincts screamed to join her father in ripping the plague bird’s throat to bloody shreds.



CRISTA PICKED UP her wooden crutch – while she didn’t need it now, she would after an hour or two of hiking – and led Derena down the old cement road, now so cracked and overgrown it was little more than a footpath. Crista had often been tempted to hike the road to the next village, which lay only a few days walk from here. But only plague birds and hunters traveled as they liked. All villagers remained under the watchful presence of their AI unless otherwise directed. It was difficult enough keeping control during the day-to-day irritations of life. But to travel beyond the calming reach of your AI – that would truly risk one’s hard-won humanity.

A mile from the village they passed Beu, returning home from his previous night’s fun with his unknown woman. Crista scented sex on him and, even though she told herself not to be jealous, a slick of vomit coated her mouth.

Suddenly Crista’s head tingled and Beu’s face flushed to fear. He stared at Derena, for the first time seeing her bright red hair and clothes. Like a rabbit bolting from a hungry coyote, Beu ran down the road toward the village.

“He still loves you,” Derena said. “And your village AI is correct – his love borders on obsession.”

Crista’s lips quivered as she remembered Beu standing over her body, smashing and slashing as blood played across his face. “Why did you reveal yourself to him?”

“If I’m by myself, I desire people to see me only when necessary. But since you’re here, people need to know that if they hurt you, they’ll answer to me.”

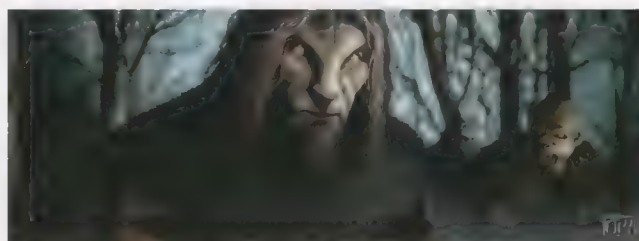
Crista didn’t ask any more questions.

Soon they reached the trail leading into the forested hills. Crista leaned on her crutch as she glanced up the dim, narrow path. She’d only been here once, when she was fifteen and her father led a group of villagers in bringing an injured hunter back to his clan. She’d been shocked at how the hunters lived – in old, cramped houses and shacks, far from the ability of an AI to protect their body or mind. Now, as she stared up the leaf-greened trail, she imagined a thousand lunatics like Beu hiding behind every tree, waiting to kill her.

Sensing Crista’s fear, Derena removed her red leather vest and one of her hip knives, and handed them to Crista. “So everyone

knows you’re with me,” Derena said.

Crista’s hands shook as she held the forbidden items, but she knew Derena was right. She pulled the vest on, strapped the knife to her uninjured thigh, and led the plague bird through the woods.



THEY WERE BEING watched. Dark shapes flickered and merged with the shadowed oaks and elms lining the trail. Hot scents of territory and trespass burned on the breeze – scents so strong Crista almost choked on the air.

Adding to the terror, the plague bird was in terrible shape, turning an hour’s hike into two. Every few minutes she stopped to catch her breath, and as they rested Crista imagined the hunters choosing this moment of weakness to attack.

When they neared the Farnham settlement, an angry voice ordered them to leave these woods. Derena pulled her knife from its hip sheath, but instead of pointing it at the voice, she held the blade to her wrist. The voice fell silent, and Crista and Derena hiked on.

The Farnham settlement was built into the side of a hill, eight cement and wood houses beside a level plot of ground from which grew several massive oaks. Even though the noon sun beat down, only the barest ripple of sunlight fingered through the thick canopy. Crista’s boots clicked over the rubble-cracked asphalt and dust of an ancient road, a reminder of long-gone times when a massive city occupied all these lands – and how millions died when that city was pulled down by hand, and claw, and tooth.

But such historic thoughts fled when Crista saw the hunters. Before Crista stood at least fifty men, women and children of the Farnham clan, with their clan leader – a massively muscled man with a white lion’s mane of hair – in front. While they looked mostly human, Crista saw the pox’s continued genetic manipulation. The eyes of all the hunters glowed with enhanced vision, while a number paced nervously from side to side as if cats instead of men. Many showed the stripes and fur of cat, wolf, and bear.

In the ruins of the old road sat a heavy wooden table holding food and drink. Obviously the clan desired to demonstrate hospitality to their unwanted visitors.

The white-maned clan leader stepped toward them. “I am Master Farnham,” he said. “Welcome to our clanhold.”

Derena laughed. “This is a first,” she said. “No one ever welcomes my presence.”

“We are all human, no matter our differences. Please, sit and talk.”

Derena and Crista and Master Farnham sat down, with the plague bird and clan leader eying each other like animals sizing up who was prey, and who was hunt.

“I am here because there are rumors your clan has broken the



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agreed-upon laws," Derena said. "And not simply broken. Is it true you killed off clan Hereen?"

Several of the hunters watching them growled a low, wolverine-like warning. Master Farnham slammed his massive fist onto the wooden table to silence them, then apologized to Derena.

"They're not used to outsiders saying what we can or can not do," he said. "But our golden rule is to never attack or harass the villagers. We live as neighbors with them. We have broken none of your damn laws."

Derena leaned over to Master Farnham and whispered, "I think you have. One of your clan has meddled in village affairs."

Master Farnham's face tightened, and he roared for everyone to leave his sight. Many of the men and women and children hissed and muttered, and one young woman charged at Derena, causing the plague bird to pull her knife. Before the girl reached the table, Master Farnham jumped up and smashed her in the face with his powerful fist. The girl fell unconscious in the dust. "Take her to the house," he ordered as several wild-eyed young women dragged the girl away.

"My daughter," he explained as he sat back down beside Derena. "The pox gened her with my temper, and her mother's rage." He laughed at the joke, but fell silent when Derena didn't join in.

Master Farnham lowered his voice. "We are a good people. We keep to ourselves, and only attack if attacked. Clan Hereen raided the herbs we grow and the game we hunt. They even attacked one of my children. So yes, we killed them. But that is permitted."

Derena nodded, as if debating these people's crimes with a voice in her head. "But killing off an entire clan is extreme. Tell me: is it true you spared their children and took them in?"

Master Farnham stroked his mane nervously. "Of course. Despite our genes, we're not animals. They will be raised as part of Clan Farnham. Do you wish to see the kids, to know they're being taken care of?"

Derena placed a red knife on the table. "No," she said. "I wish to know it."

Master Farnham stood up, knocking his chair to the dust and rubble. "Absolutely not," he bellowed. "We are a free people. We refuse to be sheep for any damn AI. We refuse to be judged on who is human by those without claim to humanity."

Derena didn't argue, but she picked the knife up and rested its tip gently against her arm. Crista remembered the histories Blue had shown her of the plague bird a century ago. How that man cut his artery, spurting an arch of blood which grew and grew until the villagers began dying.

*Flee! Flee! No talk. Flee!*

In animal panic, Crista jumped from the table, but her bad leg threw her onto the broken asphalt. Above her, Derena stared without emotion at Master Farnham.

"Are you going to make me beg?" Master Farnham asked, his face twitching as he fought for control.

"I'm going to judge you, or every member of your clan dies right now."

Master Farnham took a deep breath and extended his right hand to Derena. With a quick motion, Derena pricked her palm with the knife and grabbed Master Farnham's hand. Even though Derena moved too fast for Crista to see any blood, a slight buzz-

ing ran through her mind, just like when Blue reached into her. Crista remembered Blue's teachings about plague birds – how their blood contained an incredibly powerful AI which cared only for basic rules of right and wrong. As long as the AI was contained in a plague bird, it was harmless. But release it, and it rendered instant and deadly judgment on everyone nearby.

Master Farnham's eyes rolled as his massive body tensed and shook. Derena stared into nothingness for long seconds before releasing his hand, causing Master Farnham to collapse against the wooden table, gasping for breath as if he'd run a thousand miles. Derena wiped a slick of sweat off her forehead.

"I'm glad you told the truth," Derena said. "I will not punish your clan for the killings. But that leaves the matter of the person who meddled with village affairs."

Master Farnham started to speak, but something behind Derena caught his eye. He screamed "No!" as a young man with glowing eyes raced by Crista, a pistol in his hand, his whiskered face as focused and intense as the panthers which hunted the village fields. The man raised the pistol to Derena and shot her in the back, a spray of blood exiting between her breasts.

Derena turned to her attacker, pain and fury on her face. She kicked the young man backward, then pointed at him and shouted, "Not them. Him. Only him."

For a moment the bloody mist in the air around Derena wavered, demanding more, before acquiescing and raining onto the young man. The air quivered to tears of justice as the man thrashed and screamed for mercy. But the AI gave none. It exploded the man's lungs into shreds of pink tissue, and ate its way through his brain – all while refusing to let him die. Finally, after a forever screech of pain, the man's body ripped in half from head to legs, and the cloud of blood returned to Derena's body. The bullet wound in her chest closed as if by magic, until only a puckered scar and a hole in her red shirt showed where the projectile had hit.

Master Farnham roared a deep lion's scream of anguish. He fell on all fours and pounded the broken pavement with his fists before finally regaining control. "The fool had it coming," he yelled at his clan folk. "You know the rules."

The hunters growled in fear, but they stared at the splash of blood and tissue soaking the ground and didn't attack. Master Farnham crawled over to Derena and knelt before her. "Please forgive us," he whispered, his angry eyes glowing fire. "The boy wasn't thinking. He wanted to defend my honor, and forgot the consequences."

Derena nodded, and said the young man's actions wouldn't count against Master Farnham's clan. "But there is still the matter of the person who interfered with village affairs. I will return in two days to deal with that. I suggest you impress upon your people the need to avoid a repeat of this tragic affair."

With that, Derena walked back down the trail. Crista stared at the people around her as the hairs on her neck stood up. Several hunters held back Master Farnham's daughter, who had woken up and now howled in inhuman anger, fighting to reach and kill Crista. Suddenly deeply afraid, Crista picked up her crutch and hobbled after Derena.

Once they were clear of the forest and back on the old cement road, Derena sat down hard in the sunlight. She took the red knife and vest back from Crista and sighed. "That took a lot out



of me," she said. "Keeping the AI from killing all those people."

"Did you have to kill that man?"

"I didn't want to, but if I hadn't given the AI someone who'd dared attack me directly, it would have gone berserk. With my body so weak, there are limits to how well I can control it."

"Must you go back there in two days? They'll be in an angry mood. Master Farnham might not be able to hold them back."

"It's worse than you know. That young man was Master Farnham's son. As we left, he was debating whether or not to give into his animal side and attack us, even if it meant the death of everyone he loved."

Crista glanced at the giant trees growing along the road as the breeze blew to the whisper and pad of angry animals.



DERENA DIDN'T HIDE herself from people's sight when they finally reached the village, causing Crista's neighbors and friends to stare at the woman in fear and shock. Crista led Derena to the house and helped her up the stairs to the guest room, where the plague bird collapsed into bed. She said she didn't want to be disturbed, then closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Not sure how to help the plague bird, Crista sought out her father, who was in the village barn with several of the elders, including Ms Pauler. Crista told them what happened.

"The Farnham clan will kill us," Ms Pauler whispered.

Crista's father shook his head. "I doubt they'll attack with a plague bird here. Still, it would be wise to post an armed watch tonight."

The other elders agreed, and began discussing plans for how to deal with the Farnham clan. Crista, knowing she was no longer needed, walked out of the barn.

Beu waited outside for her.

"Are you okay?" Beu asked. "I heard what you told the elders."

Crista smiled at Beu's concern, which etched so sincerely across his lean string-bean of a face. But she also saw the memory of Beu attacking her with animal hunger – of her blood spraying across that same lanky face. She cursed humanity for playing genetic gods so long ago, resulting in people so warm and human one moment, all animal and anger the next.

"I'm fine," Crista said. "But seeing that man torn apart by the AI... Forget what Blue showed us about plague birds. This was worse, far worse."

Beu reached out to hug Crista, jumping a low growl from Crista's throat. Beu stepped back cautiously. "There's nothing I can say to make up for what I did," he said. "And you're right to not trust me. It's becoming harder to stay in control. Sometimes I go running in the woods and know that's who I am. A hunter. Not a villager."

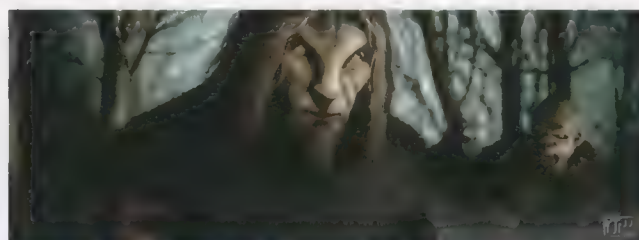
Crista gripped Beu's hands, causing a ripple of passion in his eyes which almost overwhelmed him. She also fought for

control, shouting through her mind as animal impulses raced by. *Mate. Flee. Fight. Love.* She smelled the barest touch of last night's sex on Beu, and her thighs shook.

"Beu, I've always loved you, and you're a good man when you're in control. But every time I see your face, I remember what you did. I can't get past that."

"Maybe one day you will," Beu said hopefully.

"Maybe," Crista said. But even as she said the word, she remembered the anger which flashed in Master Farnham's eyes when Derena killed his son. Some things you couldn't put behind you, no matter how hard you tried.



THE NEXT MORNING, Derena stayed in her room, so Crista was free to do her chores. Even though her leg hurt from the previous day's hike, she and her father finished plowing their field and sowing it with modified wheat.

At noon, they sat in the shade of a giant oak beside the old road, eating beans and cold meat and talking about harvesting the quick growing wheat in a few months. Soon they fell to simply watching clouds scud the hot sky. That was how Blue found them.

"How goes the day?" Crista's father asked.

"Very well. The hunters don't appear to be planning an attack – at least, they are staying out of my sensing range. And the plague bird is sleeping. Restraining her AI drained Derena's body more than I realized."

Crista gazed at Blue's haze of consciousness, which bent the streaming sunlight into strange tints of rainbow colors. Blue almost seemed in a good mood, if an AI could be said to have moods. Then she remembered the rage in the plague bird's AI, and realized that yes indeed, these entities had all the moods they wanted.

"You desire to ask something," Blue stated.

"When Derena released her AI yesterday, it seemed so angry. But I've never seen you mad. Why is that AI so different?"

"We're all different, the same as humans."

"But why did people create something as evil as a plague bird's AI?"

Blue expanded outward until the AI's lights reached the top of the oak tree, before collapsing back to its normal cloudlet of haze. Crista had been around Blue enough to know that was its equivalent of a sigh.

"What I've taught the villagers about history is correct. But there's a difference between knowing something, and experiencing thousands of years of it. Humanity had changed beyond all recognition due to excessive genetic manipulation, resulting in insanity and chaos on a massive scale. So many human-animal hybrids were created without a care to what they brought to this world.

"To seek a return to order, one group of humans created



empathic AIs like myself, to watch over and guide pockets of humanity back to your original ungened state. Others, seeking justice for perceived wrongs, created absolute AIs to dispense punishment. There were also the hybrid humans who liked their gened lives and didn't want to give them up. So a balance was created. The hunters could live their lives within certain constraints, while AIs like myself would attempt to return isolated segments of humanity to their original state."

"And the plague birds?" Crista asked.

"The only true balance is between three parts, so we needed the absolute AIs to enforce the agreement. But they are so harsh we couldn't trust them to freely roam the land. We placed them within the bodies of human volunteers, who keep control of the AIs' power. The plague birds restrain their AIs except when a judgment is needed."

Crista had never heard humanity's history explained in such stark terms. From the look on her father's face, he hadn't either. "Why are you telling us this?" she asked.

"Because trouble has entered our village. And while Derena has held her AI in for many centuries, her body is weakening. She won't be able to contain it much longer."

For a moment Crista didn't understand what she was hearing, but her father did. He jumped up and howled "No" in a scream ripped straight from his wolf genes. He grabbed Crista's hand and dragged her away from Blue, muttering, "No, no, hell not no."



CRISTA'S FATHER CALMED down before they reached home, but he refused to serve dinner to the plague bird. So Crista cooked a simple meal of eggs and rice and carried the plate to the guest bedroom. She knocked on the wooden door and Derena said enter.

The plague bird sat in the wicker chair Crista's mother had crafted in her dying days, as her pox-sickened genes turned against her body. Derena had the same look as her mom did then, exhausted and worn, but refusing to back down until the final, painful breath.

"Blue told you," she said. Not asking. Simply knowing.

"Yes. But why me?"

Derena smiled as she unbuttoned her red shirt to show the puckered scar where she'd been shot. "I haven't healed right," she said. "A century ago, a shot like that wouldn't have left a mark. Hell, the AI once healed me after my head got blown near off."

Crista felt a burn of pain shoot through her leg, and she wondered if the plague bird's AI could heal it. Maybe even end the other pains and fears and confusions which hit her every time she saw Beu's face.

"How old are you?"

"I've been carrying the AI for over two thousand years. Killed far more people than I need to remember. But I've also helped

keep the peace, a simple fact I can live with."

Crista tried to imagine all the things this woman had seen in her time. For a moment, the thought of becoming a plague bird excited her – until she remembered the dead man from yesterday. She shook her head in disgust. "Again, why me?"

"Because I need someone who doesn't desire what I do. Someone who will fight the AI inside her. Only let it out when absolutely necessary."

"I'm sorry, but I won't do this."

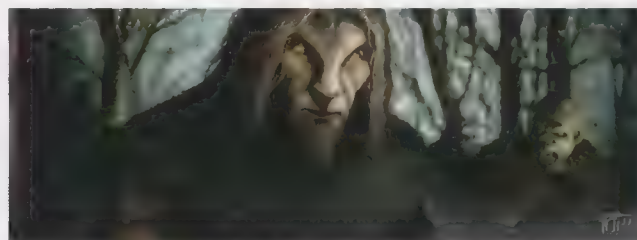
Derena nodded sadly. "That's exactly why I want you. Still, it must be your choice. But you should know that if you don't do this, Beu will kill you."

Crista jumped back, a wolf growl in her throat. "What?"

"He loves you, yes, but his condition is rapidly regressing as his genes force him through changes Blue can no longer control. The problem, though, is that Beu obsesses on you. No matter how he fights it, he wants you. Blue is correct that one day, when Beuten Pauler's animal side gains more control, he will kill you."

"Then you must kill Beu."

"No. I only kill for the actions people do, not for what they may do. But Blue was right to call me here. If this isn't handled properly, many people – both villagers and hunters – will die."



THAT NIGHT, CRISTA stood among the newly planted furrows of her family's wheat field, leaning on her crutch as she kicked the dark soil with her good foot. Above, a quarter moon shone in the clear sky, stirring the wolf inside Crista to excitement. She remembered Blue's history lessons – how humans once walked on that milky world. She wondered if humans would ever do so again.

Crista heard a faint rustle from under the dark fence-line trees beside the field. She couldn't see anything, and wished she still had the gened eyes of her ancestors. The faintest of growls reached her as a black shape stepped from the trees and charged.

Crista stood calmly, refusing to flee.

Suddenly night turned to day. Above her Blue burned like a tiny sun, casting white-flicker shadows across the field and surrounding trees. Beu looked up in shock, clawing at his night eyes as he stumbled over the furrows. Crista dropped her crutch and grabbed the net at her feet and threw it over Beu as her father and Derena appeared next to her. Blue had blocked their sight and scent from Beu's senses.

"There's another," Derena said, pointing at the trees. In the beam of Blue's light Crista saw a hunter – Master Farnham's daughter, who'd tried to attack Derena the other day. The girl bolted, running amazingly fast, but other villagers appeared from where Blue had cloaked their presence and tackled her. She howled and bit and rolled, but they held her fast.



By the time Beu and the girl were dragged before Derena, Ms Pauler had run to the scene. She fell to her knees before the plague bird. "Please," she pleaded. "He's still my son."

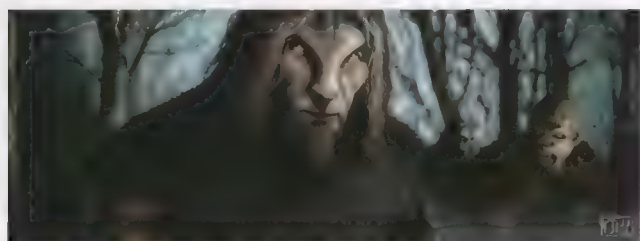
Derena shook her head. "He tried to attack Crista. Your own elders decreed if he did that again, the punishment was death. However, he's not the only culpable person here."

For the first time, Ms Pauler noticed the hunter girl beside her son.

"It appears Master Farnham's daughter is interested in your son, Ms Pauler," Derena said. "She's been encouraging his animal side. Pushing him to attack Crista. No doubt trying to remove a rival for his affections."

"Then my son isn't at fault," Ms Pauler said.

"Everyone's at fault," Derena said in a tired voice. "All that matters is who ends up dying."



CRISTA THOUGHT DERENA would wait until morning to kill Beu and the hunter girl, but instead the plague bird demanded the villagers immediately drag the two of them to the Farnham settlement.

"Are you insane?" Crista's father yelled. "They barely control their animal sides during the daytime. They'll attack if we enter their land at night. And if that happens, we will also lose control."

Derena pulled a knife out and with the razor point picked at the puckered scar on her chest. The villagers glanced nervously at one another before binding the hands of Beu and the hunter girl and starting up the road. Crista watched them lead Beu away, relieved she no longer had to fear him, but also sad. Knowing what was about to happen, Beu called her name in a low, pitiful moan. He looked terrified, and Crista turned away as the wolf inside whined and begged her to free their friend and lover.

"You must also go," Blue said in her mind. "You must see this through to the end."

"If I watch Beu die, I don't know if I can keep control," she said.

"Trust me," Blue said. "You'll have control."

Crista nodded and hobbled on her crutch after the villagers.



BLUE LIT THEIR way, a moving sun chasing off shadows. Derena could barely walk and leaned on Crista's father for support, more so when they entered the perfect black of the forest and wound

their way up the hilly trail. Hunters howled and shrieked in the darkness, and every villager huddled close to the protection of Blue's light, fearful of both the hunters and their own reactions to the blood lust all around.

As they neared the settlement, the roaring voice of Master Farnham asked why his clan shouldn't kill them right now.

"We didn't want to come," Crista's father yelled back. "The plague bird forced us. She has your daughter."

Silence paused the night. Derena motioned for the villagers to continue.

When they reached the old road before the houses, Crista saw the hunters pacing back and forth in an agitated state. If they'd been scary in the daylight, now they were terrifying. Their eyes glowed fire to Blue's illumination, and their throats crackled in hungry growls and moans.

*Fight. Blood. Flee.*

Crista bit her lip to silence her instincts. She watched as Master Farnham stepped before them, a massive ceramic sword in his right hand. He leaned over his daughter, who sat in the dust and rubble of the road with her hands tied, and kissed her. He also sniffed Beu and nodded slightly before facing Derena.

"Law or not, you've no right invading our lands when the night has our blood up," he said.

"Couldn't wait. My body won't restrain the AI for much longer."

Master Farnham's fierce face melted, and Crista scented fear rise from his body. Her father and the other villagers stepped away from the plague bird, while a few of the hunters fled into the darkness.

*Betrayal! Blood! Blood!*

Crista screamed as she realized what was about to happen. She grabbed her crutch and smashed it across plague bird's face, knocking Derena to the ground. "I won't do it," Crista yelled. "I won't be like you."

Derena nodded. "Like I said, the choice is always yours."

With that, Derena pulled a knife from its sheath and delicately cut her own throat, blood spraying in a fire-tracing arch. Crista froze in shock as the blood AI embraced its red freedom. Even Blue's illumination dimmed before the blood, as if the village AI feared what was to come.

Derena's head flopped dead onto the broken road, blank eyes staring at Crista. Crista knew she was being tricked, knew the game being played against her. But she also felt the rage rising from the blood AI as it licked its way around the hunters and villagers. She felt it caress Beu and the hunter girl. Saw it judge the worth of her father and Master Farnham.

*Flee!*

"No," Crista told herself. In a louder voice, she screamed, "No! Not them. Me!"

The blood AI turned, tasting her body, testing her resolve to defy its power, but she again ordered it to take her. Reluctantly, the AI complied, flowing into her skin and mouth and feasting on her blood. Crista fell to the broken asphalt and rolled in pain as the AI bound itself to her – gene to gene, atom to atom, blood to blood. She saw two thousand years of its judgments. Saw every human and AI condemned by this entity of purest right and wrong.

Desperate not to be overwhelmed, Crista fought back, aided



by the wolf. She bit and tore into the AI, refusing to show throat, screaming that she was in charge, that there would be no judgments without her. Finally, they reached agreement. Wolf, and girl, and blood AI. Balance. A good balance.

You'll do well, the blood AI whispered in her mind. You'll do well indeed.



CRISTA WOKE TO her father shaking her body, repeating her name over and over. However, she heard him as if listening to someone talking far across the fields they plowed each year. As if she controlled her body like the harness and reins controlled Eggbeater.

Crista stood up. The hunters and villagers stared with fear. Even Blue floated away from her.

Crista stretched her lame leg, which moved without pain for the first time since the attack. She walked over to Derena and pulled the red vest and shirt and trousers off the dead woman's body and dressed in the forbidden colors. She strapped the twin knives to her thighs and pulled one knife free. In the polished sheen of the blade, she saw her face. A glowing red line ran from her right eye to lips. Her hair burned brightest red.

She turned to Beu and the hunter girl. Ms Pauler cried and tried to stop Crista, but Master Farnham held the woman back. However, instead of killing either Beu or the girl, Crista simply cut their bonds. She pointed the knife at Beu.

"You will never return to the village," she said. "You will live with Master Farnham's clan. Assuming Master Farnham has nothing to say against that, and lets the villagers return home in peace."

Master Farnham knelt before Crista and thanked her, joined by a grateful Ms Pauler. Beu and the hunter girl held hands and bowed. Beu looked at Crista with a mix of love and regret, but those emotions quickly fled as Crista allowed the blood AI to lick into him and whisper that this was his final chance. The urine tang of fear scented Beu's body.

Crista turned from Beu in disgust. It no longer mattered what he'd done to her – only what he did to others in the future. She looked at her father, whose tears streaked the dust in his beard. Right now she couldn't handle speaking even a single word with her father. Perhaps soon, but not now.

I don't want them seeing me, she thought. Instantly the AI rumbled her blood and reached out to the villagers and hunters. People glanced around nervously, trying to see where she'd gone.

Only Blue still saw her. Crista looked at the AI and saw past its deceiving cloud of light. Saw its consciousness extending into other dimensions and across time. Saw its overriding dedication to returning humanity to what they'd once been.

"There was no choice," Blue said softly. "If you'd stayed, Beu would have killed you, and we'd have to kill Beu. This way you

both live."

The wolf growled. What right did Blue have to decide her fate like that? To calm Crista, the blood AI whispered a truth. In order for humanity to truly return to the way they'd been, AIs like Blue would have to cease being the protective gods of every village. When those days arrived, it would be as easy to kill Blue as for Crista's old body to crush an egg.

Blue sensed the blood AI's thoughts and shrank in fear from Crista. The blood AI laughed.

"I'll be keeping a close eye on the village," Crista told Blue. "Don't disappoint me."

With that she walked down the trail, the night scents mingling to the blood AI's whispers until she didn't care which part of her was human or wolf or hunt at all.

> Jason Sanford has so fallen in love with Cristina de Ane, the main character of 'Plague Birds', that he is writing more stories about her. Jason has published a number of stories in Interzone, including the novella 'Sublimation Angels', which is a finalist for this year's Nebula Award for Best Novella and winner of the Interzone Readers' Poll. His fiction has also been printed in Analog, Year's Best SF 14, Intergalactic Medicine Show, and Tales of the Unanticipated. His website is [jasonsanford.com](http://jasonsanford.com).



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# JON INGOLD OVER WATER

**T**HIS IS HOW I TELL MY STORY FIRST. DO YOU UNDERSTAND me? This is Hawnish. Long sounds and sharp Ss like the keel of a skiff pulled up over small stones. I tell in Hawnish first, always, to be certain that I have remembered it all and all in its proper places. A story is like a path of stepping stones, placed one after the next but never too far apart, to cross the gap from my life and yours.

First I tell it like this and with my hands also, so that maybe some will follow. Then second, in your own Magreek. Then third, in a tongue whose name you do not know, that was the tongue of my Grandfather, who on Hawn is called the Walker or the One Who Walks Across the Sea.

Before I begin, let me tell something I heard just as I ate my meal at this table and watched you all arrive. There were two fishermen – one brown as a horse, the other thin like an eel, perhaps you know them? – bragging as to how many islands of our Archipelago each had seen. Were I still a boy, looking out across the water from the top of the old elm outside Hawn Lorca's window, I would have been amazed by their claims – twenty-four, says the first; four-score, says the other. But now I know better. I have sailed far and looked further, and seen two more islands off the shore of every one on which I land. Not yet enough to best their claims, maybe, but when I reach my eight-first I will return and have them buy me a drink, if I can find my way back here.

But perhaps you are here only to stare at the strange little man from Hawn: you are looking for my claws or the hair on my teeth. I have none, of course! Perhaps you want stories of one-eyed giants and dragons and islands where the girls never age past seventeen. Let me begin, then, with an island of monsters just off the shores of Hawn. This is the story of how a hatred came to an end.







ON HAWN WE are blessed with cliffs and high slopes that keep us dry and guard us from the sea. There is only one bay where boats can safely come ashore – but to our misfortune that slope looks out west across the rocky water towards the island of Polyph, and it is from Polyph that the black sails come.

On Polyph – so our mothers say – the men have chosen to live as animals. They speak in a language of howls and eat meat raw. In their mouths are dogs' teeth, because when their adult teeth grow each is knocked out with a stone and replaced with a tooth pulled from the jaw of the father's hound. On Polyph there are no fires because they have forgotten how to light them: instead they stay warm at night by sleeping in piles, twenty to a room, with the youngest and most frail on the top. If these ones die, and they frequently do, their skins are used for roofing and their bones fashioned into tools. Their flesh is thrown into the flax pools and only their dog teeth are buried.

On Polyph there are no fields. Plants are grown inside because outside they would be stolen and replanted and stolen again so many times each night that all the crops would die.

On Polyph there are no women or children, only bitches and cubs.

BUT FOR ALL their monstrousness, the raids, when they come, are mostly bloodless. The Polyph soldiers bring weapons and sacks and rattle their weapons until their sacks are full, and because we are an island of fishermen we leave enough for them to carry and hide until they sail away. But sometimes a few are lost and it makes the Hawnish angry, and Hawn Mayjore was angry too. One day, standing at his balcony overlooking the square he announced these attacks would end. No Hawnish, he declared, would ever lose fish or cloth to a Polyphian again.

The people shouted back. Must we fight? cried the men, because we have only rope and needles while they have swords and jealous bellies. And we will not fight, declared the women, but fill those sacks with unclean mushrooms and the red berries of iliac that make the stomach sour, and then they won't come back in a hurry!

Hawn Mayjore raised his hand for silence, and because he was Hawn he received it. I remember watching him speak: I was standing beside my father and looking up, neck craned skull to shoulder-blade. I remember that Hawn Lorca was on that balcony too. I told my father in a whisper that I had spoken to her once, when she had caught me in the old elm outside her window and asked what I was doing. (Looking for my cat, I'd said, before I scurried away.) My father did not believe me and cuffed me round the ear. My face burned red and I vowed that I would show him wrong, but he was dead before I ever could.

"If the boats of the Polyph reach our shore," Hawn Mayjore said, "then we men may have to fight. You women may have to poison our stores. But it would be better for each and all if these boats should never land, if they could be kept back from us as though by an outstretched arm that says hold, enough. Then we could go on in peace: we could stand on our cliffs and throw rocks at them till we put holes in their heads. This, I say, is the way we must take."

The crowd complained, in the same tones I have heard when I tell my story out of sequence or forget some vital part. "A fine idea," they said, "but how will you stop them? Can you roll the

bay up like a carpet? Or close up the sea like a book?"

"We will do this exactly." The Hawn raised his hand once more. "I need twenty strong men who can give two days each from their other tasks for the protection of our island. Who may I have?"

In all that I tell, I cannot truly tell you how proud I felt when my father raised his hand. Nor did I ever tell him.

NINETEEN MEN AND Alwyn my father were ushered inside the high walls of the manor. The rest of the crowd murmured and moved away. Hawn Lorca disappeared from sight. I was left alone with the peddlers and the tramps who had slept through the whole announcement. My father had told me to go home but I disobeyed. The thought of the Polyph – and a cuff round the ear – had stirred my blood. I wanted to work out for myself what Hawn Mayjore's plan might be. You are guessing already, perhaps, what I did, and perhaps what happened then.

I followed the wall of the manor around to where the old elm grew. From the upper branches I could see the dark blur of Polyph itself, and the giddy currents of the waters in between. I tried to image poling a coracle across that channel but could not – there are cable-wrapped towers and whirlpools and hidden rocks and creatures who rise their head above the waves for an instant then disappear. The Polyph, I thought, must be truly brutal to dare to cross such a space.

A voice said, "You again. That is you, isn't it?"

I almost fell out of the tree.

"You're bigger, but I remember your face." A laugh. "Your cat's been gone a long time."

I was now a boy of fourteen, and Hawn Lorca was a beautiful girl a year older than me. Turning to meet her gaze was almost more than I could bring myself to do, but at the same time, her father and the twenty strongest men on the island were all busy, unwilling to be disturbed. It was my first chance to talk to her in five years and possibly my best. I said, "I'm not looking for my cat now, Hawn Lorca."

"My name," she said crossly, "is just Lorca."

As she spoke she clambered out of her window to sit on the ledge outside. The drop to the garden below was three storeys. She seemed so angry that I blurted stupidly, "You aren't going to jump, are you?"

She arranged her skirts properly about her knees. "I sit out here all the time. I count the boats so that my father knows how many there are."

"The boats from Polyph?"

For the second time in a minute she looked at me as if I was crazy. As all the men here know, and as all boys find out, the only way to learn how to talk to a girl is to say a lot that is idiotic first.

"The fishing boats. Obviously. Why would I count the Polyph?"

"Your father might need to know," I said. "For his plan."

She stared at me. "Show me your teeth! Prove yourself!"

I pulled up my lips. I could see she was not fully convinced.

"My father knows there's a spy. A Polyph, on Hawn. Communicating with the others."

"There can't be." I shook my head. "We'd see the boat."

"Smoke signals," she whispered.



I was fascinated. "Smoke signals?"

"Or flashing a mirror. From," she added pointedly, "the top of a tree." Then she leapt, so abruptly I thought she might fall. "I have to go!" She scrambled back over the ledge and inside the window.

"Goodbye!" I called.

Her face reappeared as she leant out to pull in the shutters.

"You will come back, won't you?" she said.

MY FAMILY HAS a street on the south-eastern edge of Hawn, an old one that leads down into the water so that at spring tide the surf breaks over our doorstep and at neap tide we can see the weed-lined upper windows of submerged walls halfway to the horizon. Once a thousand souls lived within sight of our front window; now the street marches silently into the sea, home only to bats and squirrels, owls and mice who sleep, love and wage war between the slumping chimney stacks and exposed rafters.

I came back to that house in the evening to find my mother pulling feathers from a chicken. "Your father isn't back," she declared. "Shirking. Like always."

In the main room my Grandfather, the One Who Walks, was sitting in his chair just as he had been when I'd left in the morning. A blanket had been tucked around his knees: his hands lay on top like a pair of sparrow-skeletons. My Grandfather and I had shared this room all my life but we barely spoke. It was as if we were on different sides of a rushing river, each never quite able to hear the other. When we did speak he rarely remembered my name.

I lifted my hand. His eyes rolled from the unlit fire to the floor. Something croaked from deep inside his throat: my Grandmother's name, I think. He was waiting for her to come home, as he had been since the day they took her to the ground.

"No." I squatted on the hearthstone so he could look at me if he wanted to. "It's Ilyn."

"Alwyn's friend," he said. Light from the oil-lantern made rock-pools of his eyes. "My wife will get you something."

"Alwyn's son," I said.

His head moved a shiver away from me. Afraid I might overhear him talking to the ghost at his elbow, he whispered, "Milli? Who is this?"

My Grandmother had been the first to see him on Hawn, the day he walked out of the sea, cold, soaked through and half-starved. She had taken pity and offered him her shawl. Later, after nightfall, she smuggled him back to her house to warm himself by the same fire he sat by now. There he had remained, learning Hawnish one word at a time like a slow child.

"I met a girl today, Grandfather."

"On the beach," he said. "Couldn't swim."

"No, Grandfather. In a tree."

He smiled at some missing joke. Wetness rolled from one corner of his puffy mouth.

"A girl?" Then, another word, one I didn't know and now no longer remember: something from his own island's tongue and the tongue of the books in the Library of Future Knowledge. I shook my head. He said it again.

"Her name is Lorca," I said.

The ancient head angled towards me, the way a rock turns in the tide.

"Hawn?"

I nodded.

He grimaced. One finger of a tiny hand extended up. "You went in?"

"No." I told him about the tree: close enough to talk but still a boat's length to the window itself. He laughed, a dirty breath, then laughed again to inhale. He answered with a word from his tongue.

This word I remember and will repeat for you now. There is no equivalent in Hawn or Magreek, not even in Polyphian. This is how the word is made: place your lips together with air behind, then split them into a smile, then cinch it with your tongue. It is a word made like a joist-pin fixing two beams into one. Listen as I do it. *Bridge*. And again. *Bridge*.

It is an important word for me, and for my Grandfather, and for my story tonight. Also, I hope, for you.

MY FATHER DID not return until well after nightfall and when he did he collapsed straight into bed, too tired to talk.

My mother went up with him. I was left alone with my Grandfather's murmuring and my chores. I did them as fast as I could, then unrolled my blankets and lay out in the half-dark, thinking of Lorca. She was not the only girl I knew, of course: there were four or five working in the boatyard and I worked with more when the island came together for harvest. I even kissed one once, although only as a dare. But Lorca seemed different – I had a little future knowledge even then, you see. She was exotic, unobtainable, like the islands one sees on the horizon – just visible, forever out of reach. Ah, but nothing is truly out of reach, not even the stars, and it seemed that for whatever reason, she liked me.

Many hours passed. I stared at the rot in the plaster overhead and tried to conjure some way to cross the space from the tree to be with her: swinging through on a vine, jumping to the sill like a squirrel, even lowering myself to her side of the wall and then knocking and claiming to be a visiting noble, as if there could be any nobles on Hawn the Mayjore had never met and who came dressed as a boat-stitcher's son. But all my fancies ended on the same low note – trapped in Lorca's room, however I got there, with no way to escape as her father bore down on me with murderous hands. Once my own father was with him and I felt hot with shame.

All the while my Grandfather was whispering, complaining of his cold fingers and the water and how he couldn't swim, not between two islands, not a single stroke. I had to walk, he said, so I walked. I walked across the sea.

I slept and dreamt that the high wall around the Hawn's manor flooded so that I could pole a coracle from my tree to where Lorca waited on her window-ledge, paddling her toes in the water.

I WOKE IN the night to hear my father and mother arguing. In





the silence of night I could hear every word. "We're too few," my father was insisting. "Can't keep losing more. That's what he says, and I say he's right."

THE NEXT MORNING I walked with my father down to the bay. Partly I was curious to see what the men were doing, and partly because I wanted to know if the Mayjore would be with them again, safely away from his manor.

It was as I had hoped. When we arrived, Hawn Mayjore was already stripped to the waist and bootless in the shallows, waving on the other men as they rolled, dragged and lifted a felled and stripped tree down the broken tarmac and through the thick river-grass into the water. They had started early: with some embarrassment my father tore off his coat and piled in. I stayed well out of the way.

At the top of the alleyway was a stack of five more trees, similarly cut and all with sharpened ends. Do you see? I told you that this bay of ours was the only landing point on Hawn. Perhaps I did not tell you – I forget details sometimes – that while on Hawn we sail small canvas coracles, the Polyph sail large wooden sailboats with masts and three-metre booms. The Mayjore and the men, then, were building a cage of trees across the mouth of the bay, that our own boats could slip between but that would leave the Polyph stranded uselessly outside.

My father took no more notice of me: his face had turned apple-red and his shirt was open and wet with sweat and the morning freshwater. I stole a length of netting cord from the stack by the fishing boats and hid it in my satchel, keeping it hidden until I was at the base of the elm and had made sure I was alone. I tested its strength: it tightened without complaint. But would it bear my weight, enough for me to walk on the air all the way to the windowsill?

SINCE LANDING ON your magnificent island I have been shown the old church and the common land and the mill, which is quite unlike anything I have seen before. Back on Hawn all our work is done by donkeys or children and never by the water itself.

I was then taken to meet your Mayjore at his home and shown its many rooms. In particular, I enjoyed its library: many houses have libraries of a kind but I have found as I travel that the libraries of the Mayjores are the best. I wonder if the rest of us spent our most interesting and important books feeding kitchen fires.

I am a great lover of books. Each one is like an island, a whole world forever set apart from its fellows by the thinnest of covers. Travelling book to book one may learn a hundred things, with the truest wisdom gained when one understands how much stays the same between one volume and the next... And this is true of our Archipelago too: did you all know, for instance, that every island has a Mayjore but sometimes it is a woman, and sometimes a couple? Did you know that marriage is the same in meaning and method on every island? (Even on Polyph, where I now know there are plenty of women and they don't, as my Lorca asked me, have cats' teeth in their mouths.) Did you know that we all brew beer from barley but some brew it from apples and plums as well? Perhaps my friend the landlord does *not* know that!

Did you know that on every island death is common but birth is rare? No. We do not speak of it either.

Here is another curious thing about books that I fancy, in some way, is true of our islands as well. Let me tell you that the books that you read here, and that you read to your children, are not written in Magreek. The books on Hawn are not written in Hawnish. Yes, certainly, when you open the covers and run your eyes across the words the voice that speaks in your head speaks the tongue your mother gave you: Magreek, Hawnish, Ronga-ronga, Butai. But that is only the language in which the books are *read*, and how a book is read depends only on who holds it. The language in which the books are *written* is another language again, a language that lies beneath all others the way there are unseen towns beneath our waters, that are visible only near dusk and when the currents are quiet enough to see below. It is the language of the people who dug the flooded tunnels underneath our cities and raised the iron towers that our fishermen use to string out their nets. It is the tongue of the people who live below the waves and eat our dead.

That tongue is called Anguish and it is the tongue my Grandfather spoke.

He is dead now and there is only one speaker left, and that man is me. And when I am done with this telling, and the second telling in your own Magreek, I will tell again in this tongue so that you may hear it. Perhaps you will understand something – perhaps an old word, something you knew as a child. Perhaps you will hear something of yourselves in it, proud people of Magreek. I hope so.

BUT PERHAPS SOME of you have never seen a library. The first library I saw was in the mansion of Hawn Mayjore and when I saw it I was struck, even after the grand chambers and gardens of the rest of the house. Let me tell you of the shelves that lined every wall with a gap only for a narrow door and a single square window covered with greased paper. Shelves span apart from ankle-height to the ceiling, with many of their spines too small to read without the aid of a ladder. And then there is the smell: of leather, like a boatyard; of ink, like a printer's; of dust, like an attic; of varnished wood, like the backroom of a carpenter's shop. As you might expect, a room so full of books must smell like the whole world!

I was taken to the library by Lorca. Our first adventure, climbing the ladders and looking at the spines; opening volumes and reading out passages, some prosaic, some confusing, some funny. We looked at the covers with pictures, Lorca remarking on the clothes and me on the artefacts. We found plenty of words inside that we did not know, and spelt them out with our Hawnish tongues, trying to guess at their meanings.

I want you to try to imagine this library, with a hundred books per shelf and ten shelves per wall, because if you cannot then I will never be able to tell you about the Library of my Grandfather's island, which was built into a tower of twenty floors, with each floor the size of your town square and each filled with a maze of bookshelves so that at whatever point one stands there are more books in sight than one could study in a lifetime. Even to read all the titles to choose a book would leave you grey and old with eyes that can no longer read. It is a library for all because it requires us all for all the books to be read.



I have read a few. I am a different man now.

FOR A WHILE I waited, there at the foot of the tree. Rehearsing. I would be mysterious, a magician. I would intrigue and surprise her. Then I climbed the tree to find her shutters were shut and she was not there.

I was baffled. Should I shout? I might be seen. Should I throw something? – and I did, but no-one appeared. There was no choice but to wait. After half an hour I thought of mewling like a cat. It must have been the worst serenade ever given by a suitor, and it did not work. Morning turned to afternoon.

I was hungry by the time she opened her shutters. She saw me straight away. "It's you," she said, primly. "I didn't know you were coming."

"I've been here all morning."

"I was at church. Don't you go? You should."

"Some of us have to work," I said with some pride.

"But not you, clearly." She clambered out onto the ledge and sat, feet out over the garden. "Anyway, here I am."

"Are you alone? In the house?"

She eyed me suspiciously. "There's the maid. The cook. Matias, who looks after my father. And the boys. Yes, I'm alone. And I'm bored."

"Good." From a knot overhead I lifted my coil of cord. One end was already secured: tied at the other was a decent-sized stone. "You should stand back."

I hoped she would ask what I planned to do so I could use my Grandfather's word, but she didn't. She blinked, then climbed back inside.

"Don't hit the frame," she said. "You'll damage it."

"I'm not aiming for the window frame." I leant out, swinging the end of the rope forwards, backwards, clinging onto the branch behind me with my other hand and cursing myself for not having practised this in all the hours I had been there.

Her face reappeared just as I was about to let go. "Not like that. It's only two metres. Get some slack together and throw it overarm. Like a ball."

"What would you know about throwing?" I retorted, embarrassed. "I've never seen you out playing."

"You have a cat, don't you?" She sighed. "My father keeps dogs. Eleven of them. They're a lot of work."

I gathered up some slack. "Stand aside."

She disappeared once more. I reached out and tossed the stone, underarm, in through the open window. Hawn Lorca must have caught it because she was back in a moment with the rope in her hand.

"Now what?" She grinned. "Pull the tree over?"

"Tie your end."

She giggled. "You're completely crazy." I saw her survey her room. "I know." She was gone once more. The rope went taut. "I pulled the drawers from my dresser and tied it to the frame," she called.

"Is it a heavy dresser?"

There was a pause, a grunt, and then, "Yes."

There it was. A path, from tree to window. But did I have the

guts to use it? Of course, you all know I did, but I didn't, not then. I was ready to turn back and tell the other boys in the boatyard how I was almost in Hawn Lorca's room. Then she called, "If you're worried, I used the knot we tie the dogs down with."

Grabbing the rope in both hands, I hoisted my legs up and crossed them over, and then I crawled down the rope like a bead of water. Was it my imagination or was the rope stretching out, strands unfurling? I don't think I breathed a single breath as I inched my way across and so the moment lasted forever – a moment in between things.

And then there was carpet overhead and I dropped to my knees to hear her clapping her hands. "You idiot!" she exclaimed. "You should see your face! What's your name?"

I was a wreck, my tongue half-swallowed.

"Look here." Lorca knelt down beside me. She smiled. "You can't do that and then not tell me your name."

So, I told her, and she had never heard of me or my family even though there are only a hundred families on Hawn. We were still a hundred miles apart.

"Come on," she said. "Let me show you round."

I stared. "But if someone sees..."

She held out a hand. "Then we'll just have to be secret, won't we?"

And so we were. Joined: for a bond need not be visible to be binding.



THAT WAS THE day the Polyphian fleet sailed in.

I saw them with Lorca from her window, as we argued over how best to hide the rope: I was for climbing away and going home, while Lorca thought we should throw the rope back and get the maid to smuggle me away when the time came. If possible, she added with some glee, disguised in one of her dresses.

"Those aren't birds, are they?" she asked, cutting across my objections. "Too low for clouds."

They were not yet moving: just a blur at the horizon.

"Sails."

"I heard the Polyph rot the flax for their sails in the same ponds where they put their dead, and that's why they're black."

I was silent. Masts, too many to count. "They must have felled a forest."

Lorca was watching me. I felt it quite suddenly, the way one suddenly feels the heat of a burn after hours in the sun. "You have to go," she said.

"Let them land," I said, wanting my time with her to go on and on. "They don't take much from us."

"One boat doesn't," Lorca said sternly. "That isn't one boat."

She was right, of course. I thought of my father, working at the bay. "Will the men be finished?"

She shook her head; put one hand on the small of my back, as if to push me to the ground. "Sails go quickly on open water."

From this side the tree seemed a short, safe hop away: I could hardly believe it had kept me awake half the night. I threw my legs up over the rope and scrambled across. "I'll tell everyone else," Lorca called as she unhitched her end. I coiled the line up



and stowed it. "Church." Then she was gone.

My heart skimmed like a stone, and then I was away. The shadow on the horizon dropped out of sight as I reached the ground, but like all shadows, I knew it would close in.

THE SEA WALL was not done. As I raced to the shore I remembered Lorca's story of a Polyph spy. I imagined one, living in the ruins, stealing food like a rat, sleeping naked during the day and communicating by moonlight with a mirror. Then I reached the bay and began to shout.

The wall was not done. But it was almost done, enough to limit the cove to a single channel no wider than a road. The Polyph boats would have to enter one by one. The Mayjore organised us quickly, up onto the rooftops either side of the bay, armed with buckets of bricks and carpenter's tools. Then the church bells began to toll and the rest of the town appeared holding shovels and kitchen knives and boat-hooks, chairs and stools and fire-pokers. Their faces were desolate, bleached like old pictures. The sails were now in view from the shore, cruising between the towers that marked the halfway point of the channel and were as far as our own boats ever went.

Then the Mayjore asked again, for ten men brave enough to go out and meet the enemy on the water. And of course my father was one.

THEY LAUNCHED TWO skiffs loaded with netting and poled away between the bars of sea wall. One went left towards the outcrop of a ruined wall and the other right to where an ancient tree still kept its head alive above water. The plan was to tie off the net as a snare to foul the Polyph rudders. The cords would lie invisibly under the surface; our own coracles, so light in the water, could skim straight over. But would the Polyph fleet simply tear through? Could the same braid of rope that had held my weight earlier that day hold the weight of a ship on full sail? Of ten ships? Of fifty?

No-one, I think, believed it could, but the men – the Mayjore included – went anyway. We watched with dreadful faces from the coastline, listening to their cries as they worked and trying to discover some hope from the sound.

The black sails came closer still, rounding the broken dome that many had prayed would run their hulls aground. The wind was a little to their head so they moved in long tacks, for some minutes seeming to be turning away only to cross the wind and head straight for shore. We began to catch snatches of their songs, for the Polyph sing hopeless songs of death and drowning as they sail. Our blacksmith and his wife tried to rally us into a song of our own but we could not find our tongues. Instead we waited on the rooftops in silence and wondered how the waiting would end. Out on the water, the two tiny coracles were waiting too. I could make out the outline of my father's back as he leant at the steering pole, keeping the boat steady against the tidal flow.

To my surprise Lorca appeared beside my elbow, her cheeks red from running. "I got away," she said, "after I sent the servants out with the dogs."

"You shouldn't be here." I kept my voice low, but I do not think anyone had recognised her; she'd had the sense to dress down. "They might have slings, or catapults, or..."

"We should have them too." She settled herself, legs out over the guttering. "Is that my father?"

I followed her eyes but couldn't recognise the Hawn the way she could. I nodded anyway. "He's out there with some others." I did not mention my father. "They're going to try and catch the boats."

She shook her head. "No, they aren't. They're going to try and board one. My father wants to talk to them."

The shock of that made me stare. "He's going to surrender?"

"Don't be dim," Lorca answered calmly. "He wants to talk about trade."

THE ISLAND WATCHED as the front boat of the Polyph seemed to stumble as it came about. The net sprang from the water like the jaws of a rat-trap. We cheered. Then Lorca nudged me: "See?" The coracles were hauling in across the water.

The Polyph had seen it too and were slashing at the ropes that held them, but they were hooked so far below the waterline that the net did not surface again until a good distance from the hull. "Genius," pronounced the blacksmith with satisfaction, and we all took heart despite the flashing blades.

The first coracle pulled as far as where the net went under, then readied the steering pole and darted across the final distance. The Polyph were ready. The first man who scrambled aboard was sent flying back into the sea. The second dodged and struck out with a loop of rope: we saw a Polyph stagger. A space cleared and then confusion began, a battle of silhouettes set against the drooping sun, unreadable, impossible to follow. Every eye on the rooftop strained for detail.

The second coracle landed perhaps a minute later, this time at the front of the boat. The fight became divided. The boat pitched violently, like a tied dog trying to shake itself free. The mainsheet began to flicker. The crowd around me drew in its breath.

And then the wind stormed into the fray, catching the triangular sail so that it ruffed one minute and broke wide the next. The boom hammered back and forth across the boat. With every strike a body flew, and often more than one. "Theirs," Lorca whispered forcefully, her fists clenched. "Our lot value their skulls enough to keep low under a boom."

"The Polyph are the sailors," I reminded her, but her confidence did not jibe.

"You'll see."

I shook my head. I wanted to believe her but I could not. "Even if they take it? What then? They can't take them all. What's one ship against the others?"

And the one ship was loose once more: the wind had worked it free and it was picking up speed.

"What good is a ship?" I demanded. "So your father can make a run for it?"

Lorca looked at me furiously but before she could reply – or push me into the water – the blacksmith's voice rumbled, "The wall." I saw Lorca was nodding, but I didn't understand. "A ship," he continued. "As good a way to finish our wall as any."

"They'll sail it straight for the channel," Lorca said, "then swing it around at the last moment, and lash it at either end."

"The Polyph would have to cross on foot if they wanted to come through." The blacksmith chuckled. "Or swim. Either



way, we'll be waiting up here."

He was right. I could see it now. The boat was on its last tack, mainsheet tight, sailing close and fast for us.

"Only one difficulty," the old man added. "What with it coming head on like that...how do we tell who's at the tiller?"

"It'll be my father," Lorca said firmly. Her feet were out over the water, kicking against the wall impatiently: I thought back to how I'd thought of her, as some kind of flower or precious bird. Now she was a rock and I wanted to cling to her.

"You hope it is," the old man replied, and his wife nodded. "At that speed, by the time we see any faces they'll be through the gap and in the shallows."

Lorca pushed herself to her feet. "I'm going to meet them. They'll need help making fast."

I tried to grab her arm. "Don't. They'll kill you!"

"If you can't believe in anything," she snapped, shaking me free, "then you might as well slide off this roof and drown, here and now."

Then she was gone.

THAT EVENING, BECAUSE we needed him, my Grandfather walked once more. He moved slower than the falling tide. At my mother's shoulder he stopped. "It was good," he murmured, in a voice barely louder than the spitting grease-candles laid out around my father's body. "A brave thing."

"He was stupid."

"True." My Grandfather nodded and continued to walk. I did not watch his face as he approached – I watched his hand as it crept along the edge of the table in tiny hops. "Wise things weren't ever bold."

My father's body had been fished out of the water at sundown, when the last of the Polyph boats had turned about and blown away. He had been floating face down, a crack in the back of his skull like a cat's maw, with teeth of splintered bone. Now he was laid out, dried, freshly clothed. His eyes had been closed, his hands folded over his chest as if he had died tucked up in sleep.

I barely looked at him. I was trying to see the fight again, to work out which of the falling figures he had been. I must have seen the blow: I might even have cheered mistaking him for one of them. I should have felt it when it landed, but it seems to me that in that moment my father was not my father, just one man alone and overpowered by another.

My Grandfather's tiny grip hooked my collarbone. "It was good," he whispered to my ear. "More than most do."

"I'll kill them," I said. "I'll swim over and burn their houses down."

"Be proud." The fingers tightened once more, then loosened. "And be proud of your pride."

I nodded as if ordered. The feather-weight lifted and he shuffled on.

The wake was to last for several more hours. This is how we do these things on Hawn: slowly, with candles and reading and song. I could not bear it. I had hardly known my father, as all sons do not know their fathers except as ideas of strength and

honour. He had been a man of few words. Like a doubled-over pulley: great strength, restrained. I listened with disgust as my uncle described Alwyn as loyal and honest. I did not recognise a word of it. My father had only died that day and already we were forgetting him with stories. I found myself shaking, wanting to shout them all down, but finding nothing to say. I am my father's son, perhaps.

In a Hawnish wake the body is accompanied at all times by its gravedigger, who stands at one end of the table and moves the ceremony along as if anxious to get home and eat the corpse for dinner. He is not allowed to speak but his look is to be taken as a cue. He turned to my mother but she shook her head, biting her lips shut, trying to lock up her words. I felt a burst of fierce admiration: then she caved, screaming and swearing, beating my father's chest with her fists, cursing his laziness, his disloyalty, his selfish pride. He took it calmly, as he had often before, but I could not. I was on my feet. I ran. Away from the whole terrible performance, out into the night.

Still, I did not go far. The night was silent and the water close. I fell onto a low wall and tried to let my anger breathe, watching the moon, sometimes thinking of my father and sometimes forgetting him so completely that I ached with guilt when I remembered him once more. After about an hour my Grandfather came out and sat beside me, his breath wheezing in the cold. I did not even help him sit down.

"Sad?" he asked, once he had recovered his breath. "Or angry?"

I couldn't answer but the silence was worse. I said: "No."

"I'm dreaming. Bad dream in my chair. Someone's going to wake me for a bath."

"Lucky for you."

"My only son." He said nothing for a while.

"Have to respect dreams, even the bad ones. Never know which will stay."

I watched the bats, moving through the bindweed of the crumbled upper floors across the street. A few stars span webs between the rafters.

"You're angry," my Grandfather said, "because you feel like celebrating."

"What's to celebrate?"

A tilt of the head, taking in the quiet night, the empty street.

"He shouldn't have gone," I said. "He didn't know how to fight."

"Did I tell you about my father? He was one of the last. Same as the rest." My Grandfather coughed suddenly. The air was sheet-ice and I should not have let him stay outside, but I was only thinking of myself. "I hid in the Library. Stayed away. Sealed myself off. Didn't catch it."

"Then you came here."

"Then months went by," he corrected me. "Months. Then. But it's coming. What did for us. Island by island, sure as sunset. I remember when half the houses here were full."

Sulkily, I replied: "Maybe the Polyph will get us first."

"You hope so."

"I'm going to kill them," I said. "There aren't any women or children on Polyph. I won't feel bad at all."





I saw him grimace: a moment passed before I realised it was a smile. "You Hawn. So backward. Look up."

When I did not move my head he grabbed my chin and pinched. "Look up. See the stars? Which one is the best?"

I squirmed from his grip, but looked all the same and chose without meaning to.

"Stars don't even have names," he said. "Only in groups. Bears, Dragons, Dolphins."

"I chose the Dolphin. The nose."

He laughed, a sharp painful choke. "You never saw a dolphin," he said. "No noses."

"Don't be stupid," I told him. "Every animal has a nose."

He laughed white breath.

"Never told you, did I? How I got here. Told the boy but not you. Saw a map." He pointed up. "Knew which way to go."

"A map? Of the stars?"

"Yes," he said, with a distant smile. "Of the islands."

AND SO HE told me of the Library – filled with ideas that no-one has ever had, of books not yet written and pages unturned. Shelves upon shelves of what we will come to know. The Library where he had gone to keep himself company when the last one fell ill but he did not – the Library, where he read, and read, and read.

It was the last time we spoke. It happened in days. Like a boat unloosened in an outward tide he fell from earshot and then from sight. He stayed by the fire as close as we could place him but he shivered all the time. "He's wet through," my mother whispered to herself once before the end. "Dragging it all behind him."

Then one day he did not breathe. He had reached a further shore.

WITH MY FATHER gone there was no-one to take me to the boatyard in the morning. I stopped going. The room where I slept was quiet without my Grandfather's murmuring, and if I had ever heard Milli's footsteps in the shadows they had now tiptoed away. My mother rarely spoke. I spent my days alone, clambering on the rocks around the coastline, eyes on the endless horizon, wishing I could step off the edge of the world.

Then one morning I saw a boat the size of a whale moving far out past the iron towers. It had disappeared from sight almost before I could be sure it had no sails; perhaps half a minute later a tall wave blasted the coast throwing spray higher than my head.

Something inside me that had been clenched tight, opened. I felt dizzy. For a moment I could see the whole Archipelago through the eyes of a bird, islands spread like a thousand scattered droplets of surf, broken up, indistinct.

We talk of the Archipelago as something remote: firelight across the night sky, a sense of terrible distance. But the Archipelago begins beneath our feet. We know this as children; to unlearn it is to accept our loneliness forever.

I WENT TO see Lorca: climbed the tree and threw stones. At first she did not answer, until she appeared to throw my stones back at me. "Go away," she hissed. "Or I'll have Mattias set the dogs on you."

"I'm going to go," I told her. "I'm going to steal a coracle. I'm leaving Hawn."

She was unimpressed. "Good."

"Don't you want to know where I'm going?"

"You're going to Polpyh," she said. "Because of your father. But you'll die, and that will be that."

"I would," I agreed. "Please Lorca, I want you to come with me. I can't do it on my own."

She stared.

"You were right before, about believing. But I believe in you. I find myself doing it."

"I won't go to Polyph. I'm not a murderer. My father says –"

I cut her off quickly: "I'm not going to Polyph. I'm going... somewhere else."

Her hand, that held another stone, lowered to her side. "Where?"

"There's so much to learn. There's a place, but I'm the only one who knows it. I'm the only one left who knows."

Lorca crossed her arms. "Then tell me," she said. "And then there will be two."

So I told her. She only came with me, I am sure, to prove me wrong.

THE REMAINS OF my Grandfather's bridge could still be seen. A lot of the wood was rotten and heavy with moss, but the ropes were mostly still fast. Doors, tables, floorboards, panels, benches, lashed one after another into a necklace, strung between the empty gables and iron towers and chimney-stacks. I can imagine him resting on each one, gasping, begging for a rest from the water, for a boat to save him, to be allowed to die – before clambering back and crawling on. He could not swim or sail so he was forced to walk.

We poled our coracle when we could and pulled ourselves along when we could not, and when there were gaps, where a rope had parted and the bridge drifted open, we paused, scouted with a glass and pushed forward with a paddle. As dusk fell we flew across smooth metal with the heads of trees of another world in shadow beneath our keel.

By evening we had sighted land. We pulled up in a silent alley thick with nettles and lemon-mint, on an island where nothing moved, except birds and frogs and squirrels and cats and mice and deer.

I saw then that if all the people dwindle from our islands, our islands will still not die. They will live on forever, safe above the water. So if we people are to survive, it is up to us to save ourselves.

WHAT I HAVE brought here to show you is not the original map that we found in the Library of Future Knowledge. We camped for three weeks as we searched and researched: we ate between the shelves, slept, and conceived our first child there. Had we scoured every shelf we would have found the book that named her, but we did not, so we called her *Ida*, which means *thought*. And when finally we found the map, the first thing we did was to copy it out. (The second, then, because the first was to marvel at its contours and spell out its names: here Rotunda, here Polyph, here Hawn, and in between them the iron towers, the steeples and trees, even the dome we had hoped would hole our



invader's hulls.)

The Library of Future Knowledge has books on devices not invented, places unbuilt and people and times still to come. There are revolutions and great art ahead of us, and wars, and changes in every part of how we live and think and spend our precious days. It was here my Grandfather learnt of bridges and other shores. It was here I learnt to sail.

But the map I show you is the greatest part. It is a map as if the night sky were to turn white, with every star transformed to just that point at which the freshly-inked pen was placed when drawing out the shapes we name. For just as the stars hold a Dolphin and a Bear, so our Archipelago holds something more: a land we cannot see, a land that joins us all together, every island without exception. It is a land we must build, with compassion and great courage, with bridges like the bridge of old boats that runs now all the way from Polyph to Hawn.

I will roll the map out fully so you may see. Perhaps you will understand it straight away. As I tell again in Magreek, perhaps

you will start to know these roads and hills for what they are. Perhaps you will see our Archipelago rising from the page. And when I am done you will realise, I hope, that we are all joined; that we were like each other before any of our journeys began. And journey we must. I have seen many islands and on each the houses are emptying, the workshops falling quiet. Children are born weak, with misshapen eyes. We are like embers: kept apart, we grow cold. Life is too heavy a burden to be borne alone. This is more important than the waters that divide us.

And that is my story, of how the divide between the Hawn and Polyph came to an end. Let me wet my throat, and I will begin again.

> Jon Ingold is a writer, playwright and games designer from Cambridge, UK. He has previously published stories in anthologies and online, as well as the well-received 'The History of Poly-V' in Interzone #227, and you can try his award-winning interactive fiction at [archimedes.plus.com](http://archimedes.plus.com). Jon has also written two novels: The Fate of the One-Handed Man, and Jazz, in Three-Four Time.

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# BOOK ZONE

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Gene Wolfe

review + interview by Paul Kincaid

## SHINE

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## SHADOW PROWLER

Alexey Pehov

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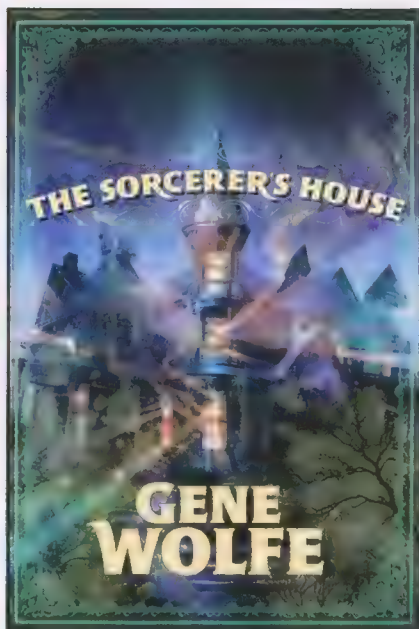
review by Juliet E. McKenna

## UP JIM RIVER

Michael Flynn

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## THE SORCERER'S HOUSE

Gene Wolfe

Tor, 304pp, \$24.99 hb

## Review and Interview by Paul Kincaid

My characters "have as much free will as we do," Gene Wolfe says in the accompanying interview, then adds: "which is less than we suppose." This chilling thought seems to encapsulate so much of Wolfe's fiction. His characters are bent before forces no-one can fully perceive, act according to the whim of other characters, never quite achieve control of their own destinies no matter what they might believe. One consequence of this is that the novels can seem schematic, a charge that has been laid at each of his recent novels in turn. It is a charge that certainly applies to *The Sorcerer's House*, but the novel escapes the worst of that because of the way that Wolfe plays up to the notion, making the extremely schematic structure explicit in the plot.

Baxter Dunn (Bax) is released from prison after serving a term for fraud. He heads for a place he doesn't know, and where no-one knows him, a small town called Medicine Man, and while staying in a run-down motel there he sees an abandoned house and decides to move in. No sooner has he started to squat there than he meets an estate agent who says the house has been left to him. Though he has never heard of the man who left him the house, Zwart Black (the symbolism is so overt as to be almost ludicrous), Bax accepts this without query. The house,

of course, is reputed to be haunted, but Bax is too rational to be bothered by that, even when he has a strange encounter with a boy who seems to fly away through a closed window. More interesting is the fact that the house seems to have rooms he can't reach, or to produce new rooms in places they shouldn't be, and there are windows that sometimes look out upon a forest that just isn't there.

Then there are further odd occurrences: a fox turns up that sometimes turns into a very sexy woman, then a gaunt and ragged man appears who insists he's the butler, a werewolf is apparently ripping apart people across the town, and Bax is left yet more land which could well be a gateway into faery.

Artifice is everywhere; you cannot turn a page of the novel without discovering some new reminder that this is not some window into a real world, but a deliberate and in many ways perverse construction. The whole of Medicine Man seems to be populated with twins and doubles (Bax is a twin, as is the estate agent who handles his inheritance, his next door neighbour, and the boy he finds in the house, at one point two butlers show up, there are two talking animals); events keep echoing each other (the fish that keep appearing, the oddly repetitious meals that Bax has with different characters, his twin brother George's arrest which echoes Bax's own imprisonment). At no point are we encouraged to see this novel as anything other than a schematic artifact.

What's more, it is all told in letters (an oddly old-fashioned construction), but the writing of the letters is forever being interrupted. Also the letters are to a variety of different people, none of whom gets the whole story, or even part of the story in the correct sequence. Although Wolfe's characters never consciously lie, neither do they ever tell the whole truth, and the wary reader always has to be alert to what is being left out. In this novel, that is more than usual, and the whole book seems to be made up of more gaps than narrative. It is almost as if Wolfe is deliberately playing a game with this pronounced tendency of his, pointing up holes in the story every page or two, but the result is something we end up trusting less than ever.

*The Sorcerer's House* is, it has to be said, a minor work, and if it is not deliberate on Wolfe's part the familiar tics and traits are more obvious than ever. Yet take it as a game, and it is much more entertaining than many of his recent novels.





**GENE WOLFE** is one of the most written about authors in science fiction. In the 1970s he made his name with stories like 'The Death of Doctor Island'; and 'The Fifth Head of Cerberus', and at the end of that decade came *The Shadow of the Torturer*, the first volume of *The Book of the New Sun* that would secure his place as one of the most significant genre writers of modern times. He has remained prolific ever since, producing almost a book a year since 1980, along with countless short stories. His prose is generally rich but allusive, his plots can turn on minor points that are often missed on first reading, and his work is increasingly informed by his Catholic faith, all of which can produce puzzlement, critical argument and delight in almost equal measure. His most recent works include *Pirate Freedom* (2007) a time-travel novel set mostly aboard an 18th century pirate ship; *An Evil Guest* (2008) which brings together Lovecraftian gods, alien visitors and 1930s backstage musicals; and *The Best of Gene Wolfe* (2009) which brings together some of his most acclaimed short fiction, mostly from the 1970s.

Since Gene Wolfe has been interviewed more times than most of us have had hot dinners (some of the more revealing interviews were collected in *Shadows of the New Sun* by Peter Wright, 2007). I tried to keep the new novel, *The Sorcerer's House* (reviewed here), as the starting point for my questions simply to avoid going over old territory, but with a career as diverse as Wolfe's it is impossible not to hark back to a number of his earlier books.

In an age of email and twitter and texting and the like, you have chosen to write an epistolary novel. This feels like you are using the form to make a statement: are you?

I don't think I'm making a statement. Bax is almost dead broke at the beginning of the book, and it would be incongruous for him to have a computer or a cell phone. Really, though, can you imagine a novel of twitters?

Or is it that you like to set yourself a technical challenge? After a narrator with perfect memory, or with no memory, a story told in constantly interrupted letters seems a similar exercise.

No – or I don't think so. I try to tell each story in a way I feel will work.

One thing the letters allow is for you to play with what is hidden, which is something I think you've done throughout your career. Your narrators always tell the truth, so far as I can gauge it (or so far as they believe it), but never the whole truth. There are gaps in Severian's narrative (in *The Book of the New Sun*), gaps in Latro's (in *Soldier in the Mist*, 1986), gaps in Father Chris's (in *Pirate Freedom*); yet as you suggest at one point in *The Sorcerer's House*, omission is a form of lying. Why do you use this device so much?

I leave gaps because I think the story needs them. Without them, it loses focus. After all, if something interesting happens in the gap, that becomes a new story. If nothing interesting happens, why tell it? Life on a sailing ship (for example) involved terrible dangers, but they were rare. There were many more days of routine work, the same work with the same people. You swabbed the deck and scrubbed the heads and scraped the anchor chain. You painted. Someone is always painting something on a ship in good weather.

Yes, a lot of what goes on in life (even the life of a hero) has to be dull. But you often seem to leave the dramatic or the significant things in the gaps. Is it to make the reader do more work in constructing the story?

No, it's because the events I leave out are not part of the story.

Thinking of that reminds me of something else I've noticed in a lot of your novels, going back all the way to *Operation Ares* (1970), which is that your central characters rarely assume a leadership role,

rather they seem to find themselves taking on a role that others imagine for them.

Good leaders lead because they are thrust into the roll. Officers lead soldiers because they've been assigned to it. Otherwise the group chooses a leader. I was foreman of a jury once. I didn't want to be, but everyone else wanted me. I gave in and tried to do a good job.

But in *The Sorcerer's House*, for instance, I got a distinct impression that Bax committed fraud only because George was so convinced he was a villain that it seemed the easiest thing to do. And this raises the issue of will. Do you think your characters have free will within the universe of the novel?

They have as much free will as we do, which is less than we suppose.

Speaking of religion, you are writing about ghosts and fairies, wizards and werewolves at a time when religious groups across America have condemned even fairly anodyne versions of these creatures such as those from J.K. Rowling. So how do you square your fiction with your religious beliefs?

My religious beliefs do not preclude writing fiction. I don't think most religious groups here have anything against fairy tales and the like. Harry Potter would not sell here as he does if they did.

Do you see what you are writing as a morality tale?

Now and then I do, though that is never the main thrust. Anytime human beings do something important, morality is involved.

I don't know about you, but I tend to associate ghosts and hauntings with memory, and of course that was at the heart of *Peace*, the only other novel (that I recall) that is as intimately concerned with one house as *The Sorcerer's House* is. Am I right to detect echoes of *Peace* in the new novel?

Yes, I associate memory with place. We all do, I think. With sights and sounds and smells. With the feel of something against the skin. *The Sorcerer's House* isn't a second coming of *Peace*, if that's what you mean.

Before *The Sorcerer's House* you seem to have been strangely reluctant to engage with the contemporary world at novel length. Why?

It's hard to lay SF or fantasy in the contemporary world. Besides, the



contemporary world changes faster than I can write.

So much of your work has extended across multiple volumes, but the last three novels have all been stand-alone. Do you feel tempted to extend any of them into a second or third volume?

I try to tell each story at the length that works best for it. If a story demands half a million words, that's a series. It would have been easy to pad out *An Evil Guest* and have a series, but it wouldn't have been nearly as good. Or I don't think so. Almost every review objected to its being too contemporary, by the way.

I've always felt that science fiction is essentially a secular, materialist fiction, but many of the best writers seem to come at it from a strong religious belief. Why (or perhaps a better question is, how)? Damon Knight felt the same way. He told me once – this was when he was editing *Orbit* and I was a contributor – that he had always felt that religious people couldn't write sf, but that the best writers he had found were R.A. Lafferty and I. Religion is a part of human life, like marriage. Like music. Mr A may not marry. Miss B may care nothing for music. Mr C may never eat dark meat. But religion remains a part of life, just as dark meat remains a part of the bird.

And how do you see your reader? Your protagonists generally have a better than average education (Bax has two PhDs, for instance). Do you assume the same of your readers, so you don't need to spell things out?

PhDs are often as dumb as a sack of hammers. Dr D may be world's foremost expert on the insects of New Zealand and utterly hopeless. I like to think that my readers are in sympathy with the story and think about it sometimes. Obviously, that's not always true.

Changing the subject completely: at the end of *The Best of Gene Wolfe* you asked readers for suggestions of stories that should go into a second volume. That seemed a rather bold move to me. How is it going? Are you getting many suggestions? And do they coincide with your own impressions of what is your best work?

No, I've gotten perhaps three suggestions. Yes, they have coincided pretty well with my own opinions.



**SHINE: AN ANTHOLOGY OF OPTIMISTIC SCIENCE-FICTION**  
 Edited by Jetse de Vries

Solaris, 464pp, £7.99 pb

**Reviewed by Andy Hedgecock**

In the middle of a magnificent Mediterranean meal in Preston, the conversation flowed from positive psychology to the question of whether fiction can be co-opted to illustrate innovation and positive change. "No," said my old pal Ian Currie, an optimist to his bones, "the creative process should be driven by its own internal integrity, discovering what's there, not slavishly writing to a formula or allowing an agenda to drive the narrative."

As he suggested, good stories create their own moods and tackle human complexities and contradiction whenever they happen to collide with the narrative.

Which brings us to Jetse de Vries' *Shine* anthology: there are bouquets to hand out, and brickbats to fling, but Ian's comment sums up the real issue. Variations on a theme are fine: it's interesting to see how authors open up new perspectives on specific subjects. But there's something profoundly corrosive about the notion of ordering up a raft of stories to promote a specific ideology or worldview. The good news is several contributors seem to have ignored the guidelines and delivered something else entirely.

The Introduction suggests technological fixes can provide "solutions to the problems facing humanity today", but the idea is drowned out by self-aggrandizing insights

into the rigours of editing the anthology. Life isn't easy for the sf optimist. If you read *Shine* from cover to cover you'll hear a lot of the editor's voice: his introductions to the collection's 16 stories are often blow-by-blow accounts of the selection process, or of his relationship with the authors.

Let's consider the notion of near-future optimistic sf through the stories themselves. There's a clear standout in the form of Madeline Ashby's 'Ishin', a complex and richly imagined story of two ill-matched partner agents struggling to stabilize their world through guts, guile and advanced programmable technologies. It's touching, exciting and thought provoking, but it has more to do with the indomitable spirit of humanity in adversity than with the idea of optimism.

Something similar happens in Jason Stoddard's 'Overhead'. I admired this tale of lunar colonisation, entrepreneurialism and corporate power more than I liked it. Stoddard's story of smart and dogged pioneers is well shaped and utterly gripping. I was miffed at the manifest didacticism of the dialogue, but I won't forget my exposure to this appalling but compelling near-future world. The key human traits portrayed in 'Overhead' are ambition and determination rather than optimism.

'Twittering the Stars' by Marie Ness uses the storytelling technique implied by its title. It's a smartly crafted tale, which can be read as a stack of tweets (most recent first) or from the end to the beginning (in chronological order). I was not convinced Twitter will retain its status as a social networking tool of choice until 2050, but that didn't get in the way of the process of piecing together the fragmented monologue of an astronaut-horticulturalist. It's a tale of tragedy, exhilarating heroism and group dynamics. It is witty and, at times, thoroughly bleak.

You'll notice a theme developing. If there's a strand of optimism that links the best stories in the collection it is something to do with human imagination, inventiveness and perseverance. If these are optimistic stories, then so too is *Doctor Zhivago*.

Alastair Reynolds' 'At Budokan' is an enjoyable collision of heavy metal and Jurassic Park which brings a whole new meaning the notion of rock and roll as alchemy. In essence it's a witty jeremiad.

Gareth L. Powell and Aliette de Bodard have been consistently impressive *Interzone* contributors in recent years so it is no surprise their collaboration on 'The Church of Accelerated Redemption' yields



rich and original insights into the lonely and disaffected life of a computer engineer. The tension arises when unexpected events offer the chance of change. A neatly crafted story of AI and human possibility.

'The Solnet Ascendancy' by Lavie Tidhar is a concise, witty and high impact offering that lures the reader into a thought experiment on the redistribution of the future. It also considers the risks and possibilities of the imaginative exploitation of second-hand technology.

I tend to lose the will to live when I come across riffs on *Arabian Nights*, but Jason Andrew's 'Scheherazade Cast in Starlight' is a high impact story of repression, freedom and the power of narrative. It is harrowing yet life affirming, but the setting could be contemporary rather than near future and, again, the keynote is resilience rather than optimism.

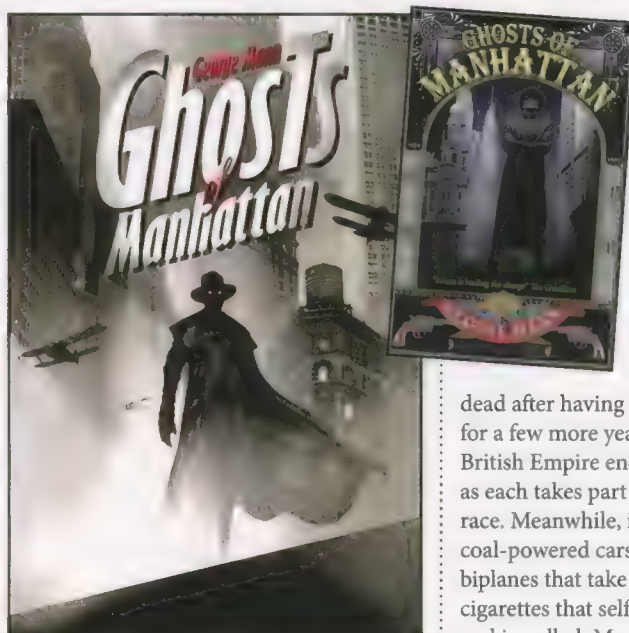
Eric Gregory's 'The Earth of Yunhe' is a more reflective and nuanced tale of repression and rebellion. The spare prose and nicely drawn characters reaffirm the notion that sedition is always a possibility.

The anthology also includes stories by Holly Philips, Silvia Moreno Garcia, Gord Sellar, Kay Kenyon and Ken Edgett.

There were three stories that didn't work at all for me. Eva Maria Chapman's 'Russian Roulette 2020' was shrill and didactic; Jacques Barcia's 'The Greenman Watches the Black Bar Go Up, Up, Up' was migraine inducing in its complexity and style; Paula R. Stiles' 'Sustainable Development' lacked the relevance and weight of the better contributions.

*Shine* is a blend of the impressive, the readable and the forgettable. The real problem is summed up by its odd and unappealing cover, which features an angel reaching out to us with a dystopian cityscape in the background. It is an adumbration of the mixed messages of the anthology: there's triumphant human endeavour, but the authors have lobbed bleakness into the mix to make their stories work. Good stories emerge: they can't be created to order by manifesto.

This is a themed collection whose best contributors seem to dodge its theme. The brouhaha heralding its publication focussed on the ideology of optimism. So too does the editor's commentary. But the notion of optimistic sf remains nebulous. It isn't about happy endings, so is it about progress through technology? If so there is little here to convince readers that technology will secure social justice, wealth distribution, enjoyment of life and meaningful affiliation.



## GHOSTS OF MANHATTAN

George Mann

Pyr, 240pp, \$16.00 tpb/Snowbooks, 350pp, £7.99 pb

### Reviewed by Ian Hunter

Ah, I thought, tearing open the padded envelope and holding *Ghosts of Manhattan* in my hands for the first time, while I looked at the cover, I'm going to enjoy reading this because *GOH* looks the part, and smells good too; you can't beat that addictive new book smell. The great cover by Benjamin Carre shows an uptit figure against a backdrop of skyscrapers and biplanes. A figure with a billowing coat, a hat on his head and two glowing eyes. Which means, yes, we are firmly in the territory of *The Shadow*, *The Spirit*, perhaps even Kim Newman's *Dr Shade* here and, most of all, Batman, but more of that later. (Although, strangely enough, much as I like this cover, I think I actually prefer the more subdued cover of the British, Snow Books version – think Jude Law's recent *Dr Watson*; this is a Ghost that is going to boss you about a bit.)

In the Pyr edition the back cover announces, above the blurb, that this book is "Introducing the World's First Steampunk Superhero!" which did make me think as I read on: 1926? New York? *The World's First Steampunk Superhero*? Surely it would have been better to have our Ghost on the trail of Jack the Ripper and crossing paths with a certain consulting detective in Victorian London? But then I remember that is a seam that Mann has already richly mined in his Newbury and

Hobbes series in such excellent titles as *The Affinity Bridge* and *The Osiris Ritual* and hopefully the just-as-excellent *The Immortality Engine* which is due out soon.

What Mann has done here is to advance his Victorian worldview into the 1920s (with

Queen Victoria not long

dead after having been artificially kept alive for a few more years). The USA and the British Empire endure an uneasy cold war as each takes part in a steam-powered arms race. Meanwhile, in New York there are coal-powered cars, holographic telephones, biplanes that take off vertically and cigarettes that self-light when a tab on the end is pulled. More importantly, there is a whole lot of unchallenged crime going on as the gangster known as the Roman (given that nickname after putting old Roman coins on the eyes of his victims) robs and kills and bribes and blackmails with impunity, and a powerless and ineffectual police force fails – or doesn't even bother to try – to stop him. Enter the Ghost, with his strange glasses, his rocket pack and his flesh-ripping, flechette-firing gun. Not that he is that good at saving or protecting others, or himself as he almost burns his legs off while trying to escape two lumbering golems that he cannot defeat in a fair fight or otherwise. It's a nice touch, and the haunted alter ego of the Ghost is well drawn, as is the character of Detective Donovan who has four days to accept a bribe from the Roman or face the dire consequences; and with the police unlikely to take the gangster down by then he has to put his hopes and trust in this strange vigilante that is daring to make a stand.

Possibly greater care and attention could have been taken with some of the other characters who get slightly steamrollered by a fast-moving plot but, all in all, this is an enjoyable, well-written, pulp-fiction romp, with the relationship of the Ghost and Donovan mirroring that of Batman and Jim Gordon from the new reboot *Batman* movies and particularly Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One* mini-series. This first adventure ends neatly set up for the sequel as the Ghost blasts off to solve a mystery that has been dotted throughout the book and I look forward to holding on to his coat tails and going along for the ride, same Ghost-time, same Ghost-channel.



**WOLFSANGEL****M.D. Lachlan**

Gollancz, 448pp, £18.99 hb/£12.99 tpb

**Reviewed by Lawrence Osborn**

*Wolfsangel* (German for 'wolf's hook'): A symbol found in German heraldic devices perhaps originating from a mason's mark. In the twentieth century it was adopted by various Nazi and neo-Nazi bodies. The symbol is said to represent a stylized wolf trap and is sometimes used to symbolize the werewolf.

M.D. Lachlan's fantasy debut has all the essential elements of a rollicking historical fantasy: action aplenty, vivid description and strong characterisation. The setting is unmistakably that of ninth-century Scandinavia; Lachlan has obviously researched the period with some care and lovingly recreates both the heroism and the barbarity of the Viking way of life.

There is a lot to like about his descriptions, but if I had to single out one thing in particular it would be his vivid portrayal of berserkers as drug-crazed psychopaths.

The novel begins with a night-time raid on a Saxon village. Childless Viking chief Authun has been told by the witch queen of the birth of a miraculous child among the Saxons and he has determined to make the child his heir. But when he reaches the place of the prophecy he finds not one child but twins. He decides to return with both, and the novel is an account of what happens as a result of that decision.

Authun adopts one of the twins, Vali,

and hands the other, Feileg, over to the witch queen. In time, the twins will be reunited and both of them will love the same woman, Adisla.

At one level, the story is about the tragic consequences of their love. However, the love triangle of Vali, Feileg and Adisla is only the first layer of the novel.

At a second level, it is the tale of a lifelong conflict between the witch queen and a northern shaman. Each sees the other as the epitome of evil and as a very real threat to their way of life. Each views the twins as an apt weapon to use against the other. And each is prepared to sacrifice all they hold dear to prevail in the struggle.

But there is yet another level to the story. Behind the warring magicians, we find warring gods. The witch queen and the shaman are merely proxies for Odin and Loki (though which is proxy for which remains to be seen). And at this level of the story, Vali and Feileg are to be instrumental in the incarnation of Loki's son Fenrisulfr, the great wolf who is destined to destroy Odin.

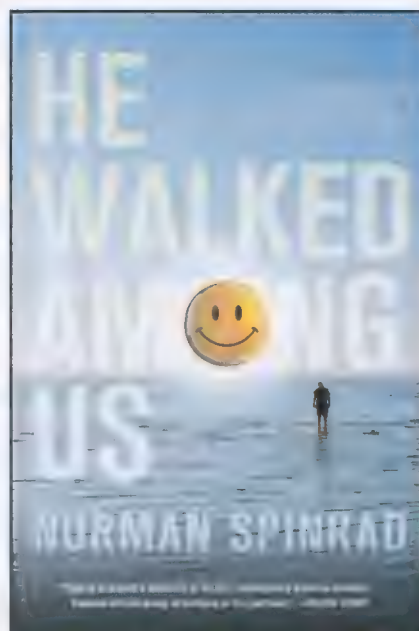
I enjoyed Lachlan's very distinctive approach to magic. In the world Lachlan has created access to magic is by way of suffering. The witches wrest knowledge of runic magic from the unconscious by suffering to the point of madness or even death. Judging by the ravages wrought upon the shaman's body, he too must suffer in order to wield power. What I particularly like is that Lachlan has taken the trouble to root his magical systems firmly in Norse mythology (with the paradigm of Odin sacrificing himself on the world tree to gain knowledge) so that they have the ring of truth to them.

And what is the significance of the *Wolfsangel*? This new rune is revealed to the witches when they first divine the birth of the twins. Seen from one perspective it signifies thunderbolt, from other perspectives 'werewolf', 'Protector' and 'wolf trap'. And in various ways in the course of the novel, one or other of the twins could be said to fulfil aspects of that prophecy.

However, it too has another dimension, which points forwards to future novels in the series.

Lachlan manages to weave the different levels of the story together to create the most powerful and original fantasy I have read for some time.

My only complaint is that now I must wait for the sequel. Definitely a 'must read' for 2010.

**HE WALKED AMONG US****Norman Spinrad**

Tor, 540pp, \$27.99 hb

**Reviewed by Duncan Lunan**

The last chapter of *He Walked Among Us* is very good. I say that not because the rest of the novel isn't good, but because it's a long read and there are moments, inevitably, when one wonders where it's going and whether it will be worth the journey. In the end, it is.

Jimmy Texas Balaban is a talent scout and theatrical agent, specialising in comedians, trading on his status (such as it is) when he finds himself obliged to watch the floor show at a very downmarket Country Club and Resort Hotel in the Catskills. His real reasons for being there are less than creditable and the dreadful programme seems like his just deserts, until the appearance of a comic named Ralf who claims to have come back in time to play Woodstock, missing it by hundreds of miles and several decades, and casually helps Balaban out with a problem by producing a wad of mint 1969 hundred-dollar bills. The act, if it can be called that, is sufficiently convincing for Balaban to take Ralf on as a client.

To work up a stage show for Ralf, he calls in Dexter Lampkin, a minor science fiction writer whose grand failure was a novel called *The Transformation*, in which (borrowing from André Maurois among others) a group of intellectuals fake an extraterrestrial contact in order to persuade humanity to save itself from



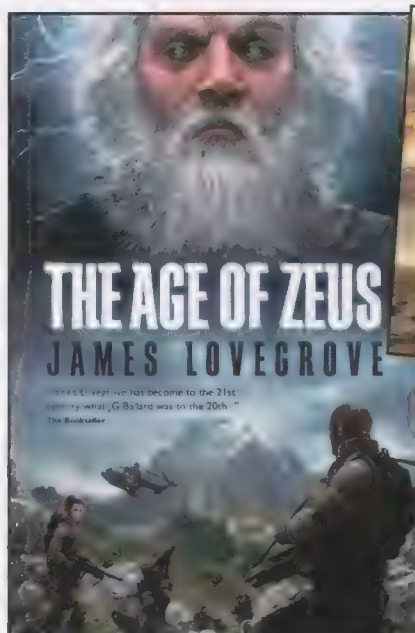
environmental catastrophe. The book still has a cult following but has never been a success, either in sales or in saving the world, but it makes Lampkin the ideal writer to cast Ralf as an emissary from a ruined future, on a mission to save the world through stand-up. The portrayal of SF writers and fandom (especially the convention circuit) is less than flattering, and I'm not sure that the various knowing references and in-jokes are enough to convince sensitive fans that Spinrad doesn't really mean it.

Lampkin's scripts get Ralph a summer TV show, and a regular viewing audience, but higher ratings are needed if the show is to be a long-term, major earner.

Salting the audience with hard-SF fans brings Ralf into conflict with popular science in various fashionable forms, but more controversy is needed, so Balaban and Lampkin bring in a New Age guru, Amanda Robin, to match the science and SF with the paranormal and mysticism in all of its forms.

None of it works sufficiently well, and the problem is that Ralf stays remorselessly in character on camera or off. He belittles his guests, insults his audience and deprecates himself, but never lets up on his contempt for the Monkey People, the 21st Century humanity who made Earth into the 'Deathship' that he says he comes from. And while Lampkin and Robin are forced to put increasingly far-out believers in esoteric technologies and philosophies onscreen with Ralf, from different perspectives each of them is coming to accept that maybe he is what he says he is – or at least that he can do what he says he's here, 'walking among us', to do. Meanwhile Foxy Loxy, a totally down-and-out homeless drug addict, is sinking into an alternative reality whose denizens take Ralf and the plot to change the future very seriously.

There are obvious parallels with *Bug Jack Barron*, which Spinrad set in the world of TV phone-ins rather than comedy, and the sex, obscenity and stream-of-consciousness narratives are less unexpected than they were in 1969 when the serial got *New Worlds* banned from the newsstands. But the more striking parallel is with Gregory Benford's *Timescape*. Both concern a message from the future about environmental catastrophe, and the dilemma of whether or not to believe it; in both, the outcome can be predicted, but it doesn't come about in the way that we might expect.



### THE AGE OF ZEUS

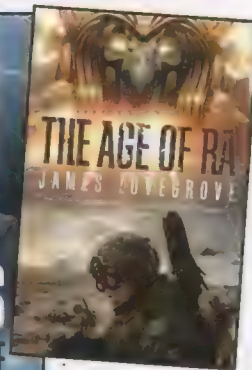
James Lovegrove

Solaris, 678pp, £7.99 pb

#### Reviewed by Ian Sales

If any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, then it follows that any sufficiently advanced technology is equally indistinguishable from divine powers. Zelazny used such a premise in his *Lord of Light* back in 1968, and won a Hugo Award for it. James Lovegrove's Pantheon trilogy, of which *The Age of Zeus* is the second book, is based on a similar conceit, but it's unlikely to win any awards. That's not because *The Age of Zeus* is a bad book. It's written by someone who knows their craft, and can spin an entertaining yarn. But that's all *The Age of Zeus* feels like: a yarn.

The Greek pantheon has returned, and rules once again from its ancestral home on Mount Olympus. It was not an easy or painless transfer of power, and even now, a decade after their coup, Zeus *et al* continue to commit random acts of divine violence. But Regis Landesman, arms manufacturer, has had enough, and so secretly puts together a team of a dozen soldiers, armed and armoured with cutting-edge technology, to do battle with the gods. Of course, he calls them the Titans. Sam Akehurst, an ex-detective sergeant from the Metropolitan Police, is Tethys, the leader of the Titans. Like the others, she has personal reasons for hating the Olympians. As, so it seems, does Landesman. Given that he takes the Titan



call sign 'Cronus', it shouldn't be hard to guess what that reason is.

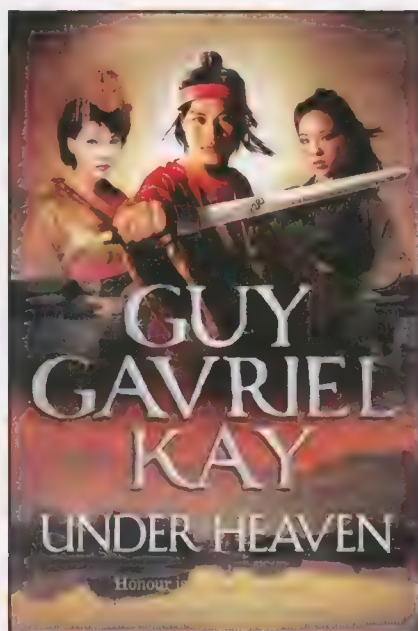
Some might say a novel should have no greater ambition than to entertain. I disagree. No art form should be merely bread and circuses. It needs to engage with the real world. Good

fiction has something to say, whether or not you concur with what is being said. *The Age of Zeus* is not short of words, and many of them do indeed reflect on the real world. The Greek gods seized power in a violent coup, but a decade later they are the acknowledged rulers of the Earth. Which makes the Titans terrorists – but is "one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist" a strong enough skeleton for a story? The four-centimetre-thick spine of *The Age of Zeus* suggests it is. This is a fat book. It is also fast-paced. It opens with a combat scene – a prologue, which is actually a flash-forward to chapter 35 – clearly intended to yank the reader into the story. In fact, there are a lot of combat scenes. *The Age of Zeus* is a resolutely modern sf novel: its prose lingers lovingly on its military hardware and technology, each character has a carefully plotted back-story, much of the dialogue displays a ready wit, and the story is structured as a series of obstacles to be overcome before the grand finale.

But, for all *The Age of Zeus*'s techno-porn, there's a god-sized hole at the heart of the novel, and it's caused by Lovegrove's authorial sleight of hand. He explains his Titans' technology with some well-documented sfinal devices, but the Olympians' powers are the result of... Well, all you can see is a blur as the author waves his hands in front of your face. As a result, the final big reveal is robbed of much of its divine power.

Despite having almost seven hundred pages, *The Age of Zeus* is not a heavy read. Its heroine is engaging – even if her competence as a Titan is a little implausible – and she's ably supported by a cast of secondary characters who play their parts well. Lovegrove has fun with his premise, and he's not afraid to get in a few digs at the real world. *The Age of Zeus* is an entertaining novel. It's a book for a dull journey or to read on a beach. I suspect that was its intent.



**UNDER HEAVEN****Guy Gavriel Kay**

Voyager, 576pp, £18.99 hb

**Reviewed by Sandy Auden**

He's always cracking open one historical era or another in his novels and this time Kay takes on Tang Dynasty China. Using it as a detailed cultural backdrop, Kay takes a sideways step out of fact and into fantasy – an important point since Kay says this allows him to manipulate true situations to fit his own aims – as his characters travel through events that will destroy one culture and give birth to a new way of living.

At the centre of the changes is Shen Tai, who is still in the official mourning period for his father. To honour his parent, he has travelled to the mountains where his father fought a decisive battle with the neighbouring kingdom. The bones (and ghosts) of the dead still haunt the remote lake and Tai has buried as many bodies as possible regardless of origin country. To thank him for respecting the dead, the neighbouring country sends Tai a gift – two hundred and fifty Sardinian horses. The horses are so precious in his homeland that a mere five horses would have exalted him above his countrymen. Two hundred and fifty will make him more powerful than the royal court and hence a prominent target for assassination. With such an important gift, Tai must travel to the court to present himself to his Emperor. As he's about to leave, an old friend arrives with urgent news – but is murdered seconds before he

can deliver the message.

This first half of the story takes Tai from the mountains to his arrival at court. It's a gentle opening, full of vividly created landscapes and infused with a palpable sense of tranquillity, that builds with increasing pressure as Tai approaches the capital city. It's likely to be too slow for those who need an immediate rush into action but it's a valuable investment for the reader in terms of character motivation and cultural layers.

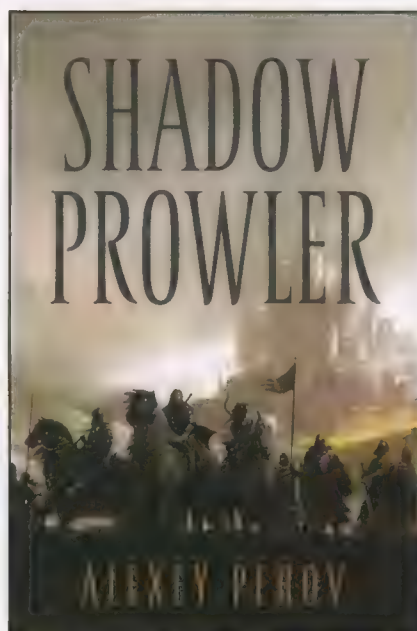
Arriving at the city, Tai finds himself trapped in a web of unwelcome power struggles. The horses make him desirable as an ally, yet feared because of the power they give him. He discovers who sent the assassin and learns the news he wasn't supposed to receive – how his own brother (now chief advisor to Prime Minister Wen Zhou) has betrayed their family. But even as Tai arrives, the political posturing is already leading the country on a deadly dance towards war.

The third quarter of the book ramps up the complexity of the story. Tai's sister and brother are revealed in more detail, along with other influential characters including the Emperor's favourite concubine and Wen. The intrigue deepens, there is a more marked sense of teasing sensuality and the underlying themes of the story emerge – the importance of family and the notion of how individual decisions can change your life forever – and these continue into the final quarter of the story.

As the politics break down, war is inevitable and overwhelming fear generates fatal mistakes. Tai's horses take on a higher importance and the approaching armies force everyone down pathways they never expected.

Kay now opens the scope of the story, zooming out from the detail to summarise huge events before zooming back in on individual lives. In a story that has felt effortlessly crafted to this point, it's as though you can suddenly see the swan paddling underneath. The change in granularity disturbs the flow and feels uncomfortable despite still being presented in Kay's exquisite prose. For a while, the fate of nations and individuals are awkwardly interleaved until we zoom in to end the story at a personal level again, with some bittersweet closure being achieved.

Ultimately, *Under Heaven* leaves you with a sense of elegance, of something to be savoured and enjoyed. In a world obsessed with instant gratification, it's like a long, languorous weekend at a Spa.

**SHADOW PROWLER****Alexey Pehov** (trans. Andrew Bromfield)

Simon and Schuster, 381pp, £12.99 tpb

**Reviewed by Juliet E. McKenna**

There's an increasing choice of fantasy fiction now translated for English-speaking readers. As with home-grown offerings, these books range from the traditional to the experimental and suit different tastes accordingly. I'm interested to see where this first volume of *The Chronicles of Siala* lies on that spectrum. Hopefully it's something special. The trilogy has already sold over a million copies in its homeland, although that has been achieved more than once by writers simply reworking key themes and characters from fantasy fiction into an undemanding entertainment.

From the outset, I find promising indications. This is a first person tale and the narrator's voice is assured, confiding, reflective. Within the very first page, the writer skilfully introduces us to the city, to its residents, human and otherwise, to the night's perils and the threat of the Nameless One stirring in the Desolate Lands. As I read on, I appreciate Pehov's skills in using every description, every exchange to do at least two things, if not three. The writing conveys character, atmosphere and information without ever overburdening the reader or the prose. The story moves as quickly as our unnamed narrator, creeping through the night towards the house he intends to rob. For Shadow Harold, as we come to know him, is a master thief and an experienced one. A less practised



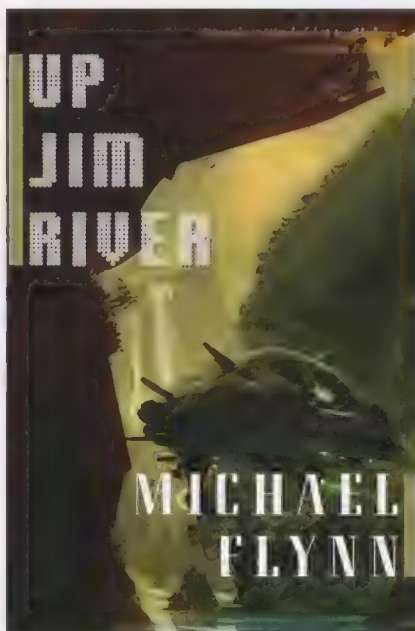
housebreaker wouldn't have survived the first chapter. Now Harold must decide what to do with his spoils and with the unwelcome knowledge he's also acquired.

Not for the first time in epic fantasy, it turns out our hero is being tested. The ruling powers aim to fight the Nameless One's threat with more subtle means than an army. Yes, an artefact is involved, along with an elite fighting force of eccentrics and anti-heroes, and this world is populated by elves, dwarves, goblins, gnomes, orcs, ogres, demons, wizards and shamans. There are magic potions and spell scrolls and all the devious weapons and accoutrements that delight fantasy role-players. However, and this will prove crucial for those readers disinclined to surrender critical faculties to their inner teenager, all of these elements are deftly woven into a world with its own coherent mythos and internal logic.

There are twists on familiar figures like over-ambitious wizards and enough that's unfamiliar to keep the reader guessing, such as the goat-men Doralissians. Comic characters like the king's goblin jester offer light relief to balance the darker aspects without ever trivialising the threat underpinning the story. There's a further undercurrent of references that are never explained; not sufficient to distract but nicely intriguing. Crayfish? What's that about? That nothing should be taken for granted is as plain as the fangs in an elf's black-lipped mouth.

Shadow Harold takes nothing for granted, making all possible preparations before setting out on this quest, even risking the closed area of the city where some wizardly endeavour went horribly wrong. All this means turning to old allies while avoiding old enemies and newer foes alike. He finds new friends, a couple of them wholly unforeseen. A wryly observant narrator, he always remains alert for the unexpected, whether he's searching for clues in the Royal Library, scaling walls to avoid the undead, fighting intruders in the palace or venturing along the lost road to Hargan's Wasteland. And as testing as the first stage of his journey proves, this is only the beginning of his adventure. As Harold pauses at the end of this first volume, I look forward to whatever challenges lie ahead with pleasurable apprehension.

That I've enjoyed this book in the first place is thanks to Andrew Bromfield. His is a splendidly fluent translation, with none of those tiresome stumbles where fantasy atmosphere is sacrificed to linguistic pedantry. The English-speaking reader is very well served indeed by author and translator alike.



#### UP JIM RIVER

Michael Flynn

Tor, 336pp, \$25.99 hb

#### Reviewed by Peter Loftus

*Up Jim River* sees Flynn return to the richly detailed universe of 2008's *The January Dancer*. The United League of the Periphery, now at war with the Confederacy of Central Worlds, has received intelligence that an unnamed artifact located on the backwater planet of Dangchao Waypoint may hold the key to their survival in the conflict. The Kennel, billed as 'the superspy agency of the League', sends one of their best, Bridget ban, to investigate. When Bridget disappears, The Kennel conducts a perfunctory investigation before writing her off as dead.

Luckily for Bridget, her daughter, the master-harper Mearana, refuses to accept The Kennel's verdict and takes it upon herself to retrace her mother's steps in the hope of finding her and affecting a rescue. Knowing that she lacks the necessary experience, Mearana enlists the help of Donovan, ex-Confederacy agent and one time paramour of Bridget ban. Unfortunately, Donovan has problems of his own, namely the seven distinct personalities that inhabit his skull, thanks to a punishment handed down by the rulers of the Confederacy. With the reluctant backing of The Kennel, the two set forth on an odyssey that takes them beyond civilized space and into the frontier worlds known as the Wild.

The narrative from that point follows Mearana and Donovan across a succession

of vividly imagined worlds as they hunt for clues and slowly piece together the story of Bridget ban's disappearance. As in *The January Dancer*, Flynn goes to great lengths to describe the social and geographical make-up of each world they visit, once again presenting a heady melting pot where culture, history, language and tradition are fused into something instantly recognizable yet fresh and new. Before long, however, the reader begins to suspect that Mearana and Donovan's quest from one world to the next serves more to showcase and indulge Flynn's talent for world-building than to move the plot forward. We reach a point where the more detail Flynn puts in, the less authentic and believable the whole thing becomes. Beyond that point, every historical aside or linguistic reference serves only to highlight the artificiality of the settings and remind the reader of the existence of an author at work behind the scenes.

The same meticulous care that went into creating the settings has been put into character design, resulting in a cast of individual and distinctive characters, each one brimful of quirks and possessing a strong back story. *Johnny Barcelona*, *The Bwana*, *Dame Teffna bint Howard* – the names alone show how much fun Flynn had creating them. It is a pity, then, that despite Flynn's efforts to the contrary, we never feel like we really get inside their heads. The end result is that it is difficult for the reader to connect emotionally or sympathetically with the characters, and while there is conflict aplenty, there is little by way of urgency.

*Up Jim River* is less complicated and self-conscious than its predecessor; perhaps because Flynn has become more comfortable with the narrative voice used and gained a greater feel for the characters and settings. It still contains multiple layers, and a similar type of structure to that seen in *The January Dancer*, but this time round the whole thing is more accessible.

Overall, *Up Jim River* is an absorbing and enjoyable romp in which Flynn continues to reinvigorate the space opera. The simple *investigate, search, rescue* plot works well enough and, although the climax is slightly predictable and by the numbers, the resolution is satisfying. The novel's universe and its denizens, however contrived they may feel, teem with a level of wonder and invention that will appeal to even the most jaded of readers, perhaps even re-igniting an interest in the genre for some. While not an essential read, *Up Jim River* can safely be recommended to both fans of the genre and those who feel it has little left to offer.



# LASER FODDER TONY LEE

GHOST MACHINE

GEORGE AND THE DRAGON

THE MEN WHO STARE AT GOATS

AVATAR

SHERLOCK HOLMES

VALAHALLA RISING\*

THE PRISONER

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA: THE PLAN

MUTANTS

THE ROAD\*

BANGKOK ADRENALINE

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Taylor and Luke Ford proving that actors really can imitate fence posts if wooden enough. The gimmick is a stolen military VR combat simulator infected by a trojan spirit force of unknown energy, and this rather flimsy excuse for a sci-fi actioner strings together *Gamer* style shoot 'em ups with overuse of CGI blood, and haunted program dangers lurking in disused prison 'fun house' where 'maverick' soldiers and techies are stalked through shifting maze arena of death. Cyber-porn asides, a sensible heroine, dreary/grainy night-vision visuals, collectively deliver basics of sketchy scenario too lowbrow to engender any strong cross-genre tensions, or even ambush-suspense. Shooting on locations in Belfast should have added a certain political frisson to circumstances, but casting of leads from Texas, Australia and Canada simply leaves Hartwill's otherwise gritty debut feature lost in sci-fi nowhere/when, with only vague/timid references to rendition abduction as connection to global terrorism concerns. Crippled by weak SF, feeble horrors, poor characterisation and largely dreadful performances, this messily clichéd offering fails ultimately to cohere narrative or logical authenticity from its pooling of gunplay, gadgets and ghost elements. A British production but, sadly, it's one that's eminently missable.



Returning from crusades, Sir George (James Purefoy, *Solomon Kane*) wants to settle down but soon finds himself on a mission to rescue a pigtailed Princess (Piper Perabo, *The Cave*, *The Prestige*) kidnapped by a dragon. He finds her easily enough, but she's guarding a dragon's egg

With a plot that's slapdash and absurd enough to be unpredictable, **Ghost Machine** (DVD, 12 April) is directed by Chris Hartwill with third-tier stars Sean Faris, Rachael

and refuses to leave it unwatched. Much farce then ensues over moving this giant egg. Eventually, a feckless band of roving mercenaries – fortunately led by George's best pal, moor Tarik (oversized Michael Clarke Duncan, 'Kingpin' in *Daredevil*) – and jealous suitor Garth (Patrick Swayze) arrive to compete for King's reward by saving princess, and killing or protecting newly hatched dragon pup and its surviving, but wounded, mother. Tries for swashbuckling amusements (in manner of *Willow*, *Dragonslayer*, *Princess Bride*, etc) but cannot match traditions of lively 'family entertainment' once epitomised by campy *Musketeers* films way back in 1970s. Val Kilmer has a fighting cameo, Simon Callow blusters royally as 'king' bloke, and nefarious Garth is swallowed whole by the beast. Quite harmless fun at times but its cringe worthy knockabout comedy (see that 'skateboarding' monk? That's proper jesting, that is! Studio hack nods, approvingly) is too lamely old-fashioned by genre standards widely acceptable today.



Jobbing actor turned director Grant Heslov excels with first movie **The Men Who Stare at Goats** (DVD/Blu-ray, 19 April) – essentially offbeat comic book adventure (with

reporter, evil genius, psychic master), boasting funny scenes bent on satirising pseudoscientific fringes of military research styled on MK-Ultra experiments by CIA. With top-notch casting – George Clooney (far better here than in anything by Coens), Jeff Bridges (working through amusing hippie phase before quiet heroism, belatedly), Kevin Spacey (always great as bad guy!), and Ewan McGregor (who's gifted with lines denying all knowledge of *Star Wars*) – it cannot fail to entertain, albeit with a dejected sadness on way to our heroes' final redemption. Detailed flashbacks to 1980s disclose how oddball, drop-out 'new age' Jedi warriors of peace were recruited by US army for specialist roles in proposed 'psi ops' – while various effects of psychic cloud-bursting, remote viewing, tortures via telepathy (and, potentially, superhero mind-over-matter intangibility!), abilities may still be used in psychological warfare missions conducted by today's US contractors in Iraq. 'Psychic soldiers' remain fascinating as genre



trope for action movies, yet this comedy-drama's focus on lampooning follies of American military ensures a distinctive tone, offering welcome shift of emphasis from explosive stunts and common sci-fi thrills to narrative exploration of farcical urban myths with engagingly humorous character-acting set-pieces, like the descriptive title's 'slaying' of test lab animals by pure 'force' of concentration. If not particularly inspired as SF, this is nevertheless thought-provoking comedy that's sometimes reminiscent of *The Ninth Configuration's* lunacy played almost entirely for laughs. Go on, take a look!



Set in the mid-22nd century, James Cameron's mega-hyped **Avatar** (DVD/Blu-ray, 26 April) has a dismally unimaginative plotline that only amounts to

*Emerald Forest* meets *Aliens*. Obviously, it's a beautiful animation showcase, with a pixel-high combo of colourful dragons and mountain islands in the sky, offering a gratifying CGI candy fix to all digital art enthusiasts, whether ready for it or not. At this year's Odyssey SF convention, I was on the programme's panel about *Avatar*. Arguments ranged but never raged. Much was made of *Avatar's* various antecedents in subgenre cinema – particularly milestones of Japanese 3D anime *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001) and *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* (2005) – but what *Avatar* lacks is significant improvement in terms of motion-capture characterisation: its blue monkeys are more credible than J.J. Binks (*Star Wars*), but never superior to Golem (*LOTR*). I saw *Avatar's* 2D version at the cinema: hoped for/expected story-twist while thinking of Michael Bishop's great anthropological-SF novel *Transfigurations* (1979) – cannibal aliens, but still heroes (volte-face worthy of Kubrick) – and ecological intrigues of Alan Dean Foster's likeable *Midworld* (1975), but found *Avatar* wanting compared to any examples of solid world-building effect in SF books. Cameron's film boasts quirky plant life, floaty gimmicks, and many-legged animals, but nothing alien enough with fascinating degrees of 'otherness' – primary achievement of *Alien* (1979). The strangeness of *Avatar* feels no more 'extraterrestrial' than feng shui,

aboriginal dreamtime, or Latin American shamanism. Instead of a profound 'culture shock', we have something like 'culture shrug' as it earnestly perpetuates myth of noble savages. In spite of purportedly encyclopaedic content of a Na'vi language dictionary, all such backstory bumbf adds no greater veracity whatsoever to screen drama, just as starship technical guides, captains' logs and numerous other info-dump compendiums appear quite irrelevant to entertainment values of watching any TV incarnation of *Star Trek*. Praising a movie for its bandwagon of merchandise materials falls into the geeky trap of over-immersion in the milieu. In retrospect, all that 'background' stuff is probably to blame for distancing *Star Wars* prequels from mainstream sci-fi; a sideways move fostering ridiculous cult of Jedi worship which claimed 'religious' significance/status. Odyssey's panel considered whether *Avatar* would "change how we think of film" and even without consensus, it seemed naysayers won that argument. What *Avatar* offers is good spectacular adventure that's very pretty but ultimately hollow, extraordinarily lightweight and too easily predictable.



Not to be confused with Guy Ritchie's blockbuster action hero, **Sherlock Holmes** (DVD, 26 April) is an Asylum production from new director Rachel Lee Goldenberg. Using creator's name 'Sir Arthur Conan Doyle' in title credit hints slyly at 'definitive version' but, of course, that's nonsensical enough to be a part of this in-joke spoof treatment. Sea monster sinks treasure ship, dinosaur stalks east-end slums, Holmes' wicked brother Thorpe is steampunk Iron Man, robot 'femme fatale' is a time-bomb walking to Bucks palace, and there's mecha dragon versus hot air balloon 'copter in London skies! Abandon all hopes of this evoking Alan Moore (more *LXG* than *From Hell*) at his most whimsical/irreverent though. With loathsomely amateurish pace, no unearthed 'great detective' cliché (ratiocination masterclass, undercover disguise, pipe-smoking, Dr Watson's buffoonery, etc) left unmolested, and elementary school plotting so bereft of interest/intrigues it is the movie equivalent of a finished crossword puzzle in yesteryear's broadsheet,

and this hysterically dumb adventure is never weird or bad enough to be funny. Somehow it manages to make Sonnenfeld's *Wild Wild West* (1999) seem like a retro genre comedy masterpiece. If you have read this far, please keep quiet about this blasphemously outrageous non-canonical and largely risible rip-off. We really don't want to start a panic among Sherlock movie completists or *Doctor Who* fans!



### Valhalla Rising

(DVD/Blu-ray, 26 April) is made by Nicolas Winding Refn (Danish director of *Pusher* trilogy). It's no-holds-barred Christian Vikings versus thuggish

pagans, and Iron Age battler One-Eye (Mads Mikkelsen, 'Le Chiffre' from 2006's *Casino Royale*; Tristram in Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur*) is balancing force, like an angel of death with a young blond boy sidekick doing all his talking for him. Firstly, notice fantastic scenery (filmed on Scottish locations!) of windy hilltops, foggy lowlands, and terrain so formidably rugged you'll (possibly) clean shave your beard just by looking at rocks. There's genuinely eerie use of landscape as prominent supporting character here, and it perfectly evokes 'hard nature' style of Werner Herzog's wilderness epics. Secondly, mute hero One-Eye is even harder than mountains of granite and capable of extreme violence: throat-biting, disembowelment, axe-hacked bodies, severed heads planted on sticks; One-Eye sheds no tears for prey, escaping from gladiatorial slavery during a horrific bloodbath. So manly and tough, One-Eye occasionally makes monosyllabic Conan seem like a talkative wimp. Perhaps One-Eye really is "from hell," as the boy Are (Maarten Stevenson, never precocious) informs 'men of god' recruiting notorious slayer One-Eye for their crusade against heathens in the holy lands. Slowly revealing almost impenetrable subtexts (man and boy embark on spiritual journey into soul of darkness), *Valhalla Rising* benefits from much superb cinematography depicting the unspoilt ancient world, a powerfully atmospheric score, and – quite unlike *The Road* – this is not a gloomily theatrical victim of its own thematic pretensions.

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Plan B-movie from outer space, **Battlestar Galactica: The Plan** (Blu-ray/DVD, 10 May) is a TV addendum to *BSG* remake season five (reviewed in IZ #223) and *BSG: Razor* (IZ #215) that explores this space opera conflict from Cylon perspectives. It is written by producer Jane Espenson, directed by *BSG* star Edward James Olmos (who plays Adama), and economically recycles archived footage from several episodes with fan-friendly 'greatest hits' moments – like that "No more Mr nice Gaius!" line – that boosts otherwise limited appeal of expository subplot, centred on faux priest Brother John Cavil, alias Number One (Dean Stockwell). He's the

only atheist Cylon, but he's presented here as overseer/architect of *BSG Plan*. Not a furniture system or diet fad, but: "Let's get this genocide started." Everything burns on nuked colony worlds. But, on ruined Caprica, survivors practice guerrilla tactics against occupation forces while Cylon sleeper agents on mankind's starships become saboteurs and 'suicide' bomber to even the odds. Program conflicts turn a few Cylons schizoid when divided loyalties expose latent humanity in machines. We fast-forward through edited highlights and action replays with Cavil's untold story sequences dramatising infiltration, betrayal, and chiding of reluctant undercover assassins in days, weeks, months after opening's impressive deployment of WMD. Probably unwatchable if you haven't seen any *BSG* before, this serves as a timely reminder how unintentionally amusing the show could be. Different versions of Cylon One arguing merits of humans, while awaiting 'death' by jettison through airlock, plays here like a doppelganger comedy double-act.



Another month, another zombie movie... David Morley's **Mutants** (DVD, 10 May) is a French sci-fi horror with its genre accent firmly on gruesome transformation (as its title suggests).

Its apocalyptic drama is symbolised by a blood-splattered ambulance that emergency doctor Sonia (Hélène de Fougerolles, *Vampire Party*) – heroine with passing resemblance to Marion Cotillard – drives around cinematic alpine high roads, transporting wounded partner Marco (Francis Renaud, *Scorpion*, Olivier Marchal's *MR 73*) to safety; awaiting rescue by army helicopter. Reasonably well-made/well-acted, but fairly nondescript as post-holocaust SF, *Mutants* offers just slow-burning images of body-horror changes, depicting infected Marco's wretched suffering as he turns feral before going berserk, and his beloved Sonia's fearful/anguished reaction to such despairing loss.



Approach with caution, ignore at your peril, Americanised remake of **The Prisoner** (DVD/Blu-ray, 3 May) is predictably stale, as expected from a TV mini-series which attempts reinterpretation of Patrick McGooohan's 1967 brainchild. Yet, paradoxically, this effort is rather better than it has any right to be. (I say that as a diehard *Prisoner* fan who's long dreaded any remake of this beloved cult series, and who successfully escaped from Portmeirion resort after my brother's wedding there a few years ago!) Thankfully, by filming on locations in South Africa, not coastal Wales, this SF drama avoids risky close comparison to McGooohan's classic show, at least in terms of scenic backdrops. Thematically, however, this struggles bravely to update timeless qualities of the original (see IZ #213) without stumbling over any ironic obstacles on the way to its encapsulated

future. Whereas the original was crazily innovative breakthrough television at its finest and most challenging, taking shortcuts and venturing fearlessly down blind alleys, this remake's a timorous beast, sticking to familiar thoroughfares, genre TV stomping grounds, and reiterations of psycho-corporate cyberpunk tropes. • Numerically appropriate, there are six episodes. Jim Caviezel plays amnesiac analyst Michael alias 'Six', waking up alone in the desert, walking into a quaintly retro 1960s' designer township called 'the Village', where he's told that authorities know him and wonder why he rejects community friendship. Ian McKellan is perfectly cast as 'Two', with malevolent spymaster traits masked by gentilities of colonial benefactor, proudly espousing family values (outsider Six is having none of that), while he promotes hope and contentment (or else: clinic!). Sincerity conflicts with guile. Secrets veil truth and vice versa. That iconic teacup-rattling scene is replayed, but 30+ years of image-ideas from wealth of TV and movies – especially genre stuff influenced by original *Prisoner* – are drawn upon for inspiration. • Unlike McGooohan's individualist everyman hero, this series includes Six's flashbacks to Michael's life before/after resignation from

his job in corporate security, studying CCTV footage; which obviously torpedoes any mystery about his identity. However, thematic story arc transposed from 'Cold War' paranoia onto 'war on terror' fears works to remake's advantage, with glass twin towers mirage on horizon guarded by giant balloon sentry (though Rover is less menacing here). The bomb attack on Village café wrenches conspiracy narrative into 21st century, when a resistance group known as 'dreamers' are blamed. Village populace are on drugs and addicted to TV, like drone inmates of George Lucas' serious drama *THX-1138* (1971), but not all the supporting characters are obviously complicit in Two's psyche-twisting deception against distressed/defiant Six, in authoritarian response to his rebelliously disruptive presence in the Village. • Following induction of *Arrival*, things settle down. Second episode *Harmony* (title derivation: original's 'virtuality' *Living in Harmony*) has Six fervently oppose Two's attempts to instil a sense of 'belonging', but he attends 'talking cure' therapy at clinic and 'returns' to bus depot job, driving sightseeing tour (that, along with taxi rides, embellishes Village views on township scale). Destination 'Escape' is unveiled as Village's holiday resort (with its own pool!),



Adding character crudeness to survivors' emotional damage, borderline psycho/interloper Frank, and his untrustworthy cohorts, breach Sonia's isolated hideaway in search of keys to ambulance parked outside. Sonia resists these intruders but it immediately becomes clear the volatile situation is much worse than before. Lacking notable originality of tone, mode or plot, *Mutants* is hardly essential viewing. Despite convincing sets and impressive locations, the film does not actually look very good either: psychological angles are sharply defined, but it is troubled by irritating overuse of jittery handheld camera work and variously murky interiors that make stunt action seem deliberately lifeless (no pun intended!) when a dark vision of bleakness is probably intended, and this undermines impact of confrontations. When compared to silly-but-fun zombie flicks, like *Days of Darkness* (Black Static #8), this attempts a serious take on familiar siege ideas formulated as subgenre trash, yet fails to maintain sense of purpose or suitable intensity throughout.



(remember Dennis Potter's disastrous *Cold Lazarus*?). Perhaps it's a kind of twisted snobbery that lifelong SF fans take guilty pleasure in this? Based upon a post-apocalyptic novel by Cormac McCarthy, **The Road** (DVD/Blu-ray, 17 May), directed by John Hillcoat, is a relentlessly downbeat study of characters struggling to find any purpose in life while living through a terminally bleak end-of-the-world scenario of non-specific cause. It's not a question of how did our hobo-chic hikers survive, it's more why do they still bother breathing in such drearily harsh conditions. Devastated urban scenery indicates a dying planet without a hope of reprieve/escape. Discovering a well-

Genre authors can enter mainstream literature with a regularity that's inspiring, whereas 'literary' writers usually crash 'n' burn in crossing tracks from mainstream to SF

stocked bomb shelter merely prolongs the ordeal of dismal existence for nameless father and son, both apparently sustained only by flashbacks/memories of a suicidal wife/mother. Under darkening skies on road to extinction, ominous/melancholy music plays throughout encounters with nomadic gangs and cannibal atrocities. If it wasn't all so po-faced this could be viewed as pitch black comedy. Hillcoat's earlier work includes futuristic prison horror for intolerably grim *Ghosts...of the Civil Dead* (1988) and a dreadfully pretentious 'spaghetti' western *The Proposition* (2005). *The Road* offers a boring trial of grey days, each punctuated by 'shocks' or 'hazards' that fail to enliven a routinely tragic story. Dad hauls around his psych-thesis pallet-load of 'trust issues', avoiding confrontation or trauma. Apprehensive son learns from his father's instincts for survival, but wants, stubbornly, to find good in people of such brutal landscapes. "The answer's no." "What's the question?"

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evinced a forlorn belief in possibility of "normal vacation" spot much like edge-of-world desire/dream of Shell beach in *Dark City* (1998). Six/Michael learns that his deceased brother may still be alive; Two's apparent ruse is confirmed by hard evidence supporting delusions contradicting Michael's life/work in New York, where he annoyed gatekeepers of info control. Which reality is actually real? Diegetic soap opera echoes *Life on Mars* while providing unreliable narrative commentary. Vulgar as graffiti, charmless as stakeout duty, activities of 24/7 observers in Village are set-piece encounters, stage-managed like daily routines of Peter Weir's *Truman Show* (1998). • *Anvil* finds Six recruited for undercover ops, further investigating a suffocating miasma of guilt resulting from his NYC job in CCTV monitoring. Why did he resign? While mysterious sinkholes begin appearing in random Village backyards, Six is tasked with study of dreamers for signs of rebellion, coincidentally discovering Two's ongoing plan to crush identities drawn from imagination. Trapped in caves of infinite regret, Six now realises that becoming as manipulative as his captors is effective means of resistance. Incriminating photos, delivered anonymously, betray trusting Six's budding relationship with that nice

lady doctor 313 (Ruth Wilson). A penny-farthing hangs in seedy pub's cellar, but so many fascinating quirks from original series remain conspicuously absent. • 'Blink-match' is tech behind Village's dating service in *Darling*, where Six's introduction to 4-15, alias Lucy (Hayley Atwell), one-night-stand from his past life, rekindles passion and fears. Nightly sedation and brainwashing by 313 attempts to manufacture love, via genetic transfer, but chemical romance stymied by choices and unforeseen consequences. No such contrived feelings are genuine, but Two still wonders if he can break Six's heart. Meanwhile, Two's gay son 11-12 (Jamie Campbell Bower, Caius in *New Moon*) reacts to being raised on lies, while fretting over suspicious cause of his bedridden mother's almost comatose condition. • Transgression was principal mode of McGoohan's show, but, stuck in this pastel paradise, *Schizoid* rarely ventures beyond current goggle-box rules, entrenched in alter-ego performances, as 'un-Two' buys cigarettes – "Smoking is a kind of suicide", "That's a bit philosophical for a Thursday" – largely ignoring a possibly intriguing subplot wherein Six's doppelganger wreaks havoc with status quo. It's rarely noted, but even if McGoohan's work on *Prisoner* episodes was not directly influenced by SF

novels of Philip K. Dick, it's clear that astute McGoohan tapped into remarkably similar themes, addressing questions of identity/perceptions of reality/social control, accomplishing insightful TV renderings of phildickian notions decades before PKD's oeuvre was critically acclaimed outside SF community's fandom ghetto. With all this in mind, and in wake of many cinema adaptations of PKD books, there's nothing that could possibly be done for this *Prisoner* remake that's honestly original. • Finally, in *Checkmate*, issued with his certificate of dying, Six clings desperately to a freedom that means absence from Village life, but story arc of this mildly successful mini-series downgrades potential, nixing extraordinary "allegorical conundrum" of McGoohan's expansive milieu in favour of a sci-fi schema over-explaining virtuality of unconscious mind, unravelling suspense through merciful murder/tragic suicide. Whole point of Michael's clandestine, and seemingly fateful, meeting with enigmatic Curtis (McKellan, of course) in NYC undermines revelatory impact of "Six is the one" political decree for simply generic, rather bland leadership coda: "Breathe in, breathe out...more Village." Oh, Michael – new one but not a nice one...what have you done?

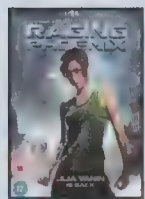


## ROUND-UP: (ASIAN) ACTION PORN

Unimaginative and imitative pulp adventure filmmakers are now fielding amateurish lacklustre performances in mediocre or formulaic plots, existing only as framework to showcase heroic fighting sequences with minimal fun of comedy moments (as when a gang of seemingly formidable rescuers are gunned down easily by a single henchman), as in Raimund Huber's watchable yet unconvincing **Bangkok Adrenaline** (DVD, 22 March). It's all parkour chases and kick-boxing bouts interspersed with that iconic line-up for slow-motion walk towards camera, now de rigueur in overblown thrillers. Yes, if gruelling senseless torments can be labelled 'torture porn', then such mindless action pictures deserve a similar tag, denoting their attainment of habitual excess and great escapes from anything like realism. These are movies that wallow in threadbare storylines, nonstop kineticism and choreographed mayhem, but have little appeal as involving narratives. Is this a 'brutal' review? I don't know. If the film doesn't squeal, perhaps I'm not kicking it hard enough.



*Geisha vs. Ninjas* (2008) is released on DVD (5 April) as **Geisha Assassin**, directed by former stunts expert Gô Ohara. It's a cheaply made debut feature, shot on video in largely style-free manner. Minami Tsukui plays determined yet ultimately misguided heroine Kotomi, samurai's daughter on mission to avenge her long dead/'murdered' father. She encounters and slaughters ninja team and boxing monk, tackles a magician's beastly demons, gets the better of a peasant woman costumed like an Apache archer in a rainy day's punch-up, and spends combat 'intermission' periods traipsing alone through empty woodlands on way to next opponent. There are flashbacks to Kotomi's childhood training in swordplay, and ostensible villains are overly fond of derogatory remarks about her evident femininity, but she gradually loses familiar attire/makeup of geisha profession, adopting tragically ragged 'bandit' appearance while her fighting scenes progress towards finale against formidable 'ronin' held responsible for making her an orphan. Watchable, but rather weak on action/outré sequences if compared to similar/superior chambara, such as Shinsuke Sato's excellent *Princess Blade* (2001), Ryûhei Kitamura's marvellous *Azumi* (2003), or Fumihiko Sori's blind swordswoman drama *Ichi* (2008), a worthwhile 'western' style reworking of those 'Zatoichi' movies.



Even more comic book styled/'fantasy' orientated than Huber's exercise in gratuitous violence, **Raging Phoenix** (DVD/Blu-ray, 12 April) has action star Jija (*Chocolate*) Yanin as Deu. Cheated on, and fooled again, she eventually rises from ashes of former life to combat kidnap/slavery crimes, taking gutsy revenge on sadistic gangsters who almost caught her too. With its curious mix of drunken kung fu and wirework stunts, Muay Thai, break-dancing and knockabout slapstick, this hectically paced action flick features junkyard balletic alcoholism and pheromone-sniffers trafficking in addictive perfume (distilled from female tears of sorrow), culminating in spectacularly brutish showdown between our plucky heroine and numerous fighters. Not serious drama or even particularly exciting, but quite enjoyable if you're a fan of Jackie Chan's films.



Welcome re-release **Tai-Chi Master** (DVD, 26 April) stars martial arts legend Jet Li and kung fu queen Michelle Yeoh. Made in 1993, directed by Yuen Woo-ping, this was previously available on DVD under the title *Twin Warriors* (aka: *Tai ji: Zhang San Feng*). It boasts a tad more substance than actioner examples cited above. With story elements borrowed from manga lore, demonstrating how personal ambition shatters friendship, desire for greater destiny fractures brotherhood, ruthlessly greedy bullies always get comeuppance from 'peaceable' heroes. Shaolin fist mighty, Buddhist palm stronger. Free-for-all rumble of expertly choreographed 'wire-fu' in training school results in expulsion of troublemakers. Later, ex-monk (Li) teams with deserted wife (Yeoh) of governor's lackey to overthrow tyrannical eunuch, bringing Li's corrupted former childhood pal to justice in process. Athletic/acrobatic prowess dominates but some fight scenes are roundly comedic in style. Li's traitorously vicious friend turned foe becomes irredeemable when he needlessly kills his 'girlfriend'. After hero rescues heroine, she nurses him back from crazy depression rooted in loss and betrayal. From simple observation of life, hero gains preternatural/spiritual understanding of nature for tai-chi mastery. Game over for bad guys...

# MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

REPO MEN

KICK-ASS

ALICE IN WONDERLAND

CLASH OF THE TITANS

LEGION

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON

THE LOVELY BONES

SOLOMON KANE

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The most surgically skewering diagnosis of what's wrong with Hollywood's brain comes in Alex Cox's *Searchers 2.0*, his rarely-seen 2008 gem about two washed-out bit players roadtripping across the west to "kick the ass" of a veteran director they blame for their real-life failings. Jaclyn Jonet, the newest star of Cox's rolling repertory company, tags along as the cynical daughter whose SUV they appropriate, and in the film's killer scene completes every one of their classic-movie synopses by chipping in from the back seat with the maddening refrain "...and becomes a hero." Exactly why becoming a hero should be the only story recognised by the studio hive-mind is a complex puzzle in systemic pathology – though one significant trigger event was the notorious seven-page memo prepared by Christopher Vogler for Disney in the eighties that summarised Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* "monomyth" in twelve easy-to-follow steps for people with very low attention spans. But Jonet went on to become a heroine in her own right as the lead in Cox's 2009 *Repo Chick*, a cheekily independent non-sf non-sequel to his 1983 career-maker *Repo Men*, to whose title and characters Universal owned the rights. The studio weren't amused, having just made a film of Eric Garcia's artificial-organ novel *Repossession Mambo*, whose title was itself a punning allusion to Cox's original; and Universal's sudden anxiety to repossess its intellectual property was clarified sharply when, after an ominously long delay, the film emerged rebranded for release with the

recollapsed title **Repo Men**.

Needless to say, *Repo Men* has as much to do with *Repo Men* as *The Killers* has with *The Killer*. But even on its own terms it's an oddly stitched-together film. For an hour-plus, it's pretty by-the-book: Jude Law, woefully miscast as a cold-blooded bounty hunter, loses his stomach for scalpel-toting action along with his literal and figurative hearts when he finds himself implanted with one of his own company's unaffordable artiforgs, and trades in his suburban family to go on the run with the much hotter Alice Braga. But things take a strange turn in the long, soggy middle act when the plot stops dead so he can write a book, and it turns into one of those novelist's films in which voiceover, textuality, and the mechanics of the writing process play an improbably prominent role ("Grab the typewriter!" is not a line often heard in action scenes) and the book of the film of the book becomes part of its own story. (As indeed it was: Garcia, best known for *Matchstick Men* and the *Anonymous Rex* book and TV series, sold the rights to *Repossession Mambo* before the novel was actually written, so that his screenplay was finished first and the film already in the can by the time the novel appeared.) When the action exhaustingly resumes, we're in a different and much bloodier film, racing a twist ending so long and thunderously signalled that the only surprise is how much of the plot is left still standing when the rug is finally pulled after Jude takes down the system and becomes a hero.



The simultaneous allure and absurdity of the becomes-a-hero narrative are the driver for **Kick-Ass**, Matthew Vaughn and Jane Goldman's zippy adaptation of the Millar/Romita comic about a 21st-century Forbush-Man, which was made without studio backing on the back of a daring private-finance deal that gave Vaughn valuable creative control but made for huge marketing challenges down the line. It's clearly been a really, really hard film to sell. On its own, the comic had near-zero brand recognition; the violence and profanity shot any film version way out of range of a PG certificate; and everyone but the makers was predictably nervous about the iconic Mindy's potty mouth and serial assassinhood. And though immense effort has gone into building word-of-mouth momentum ahead of its US debut, as of writing its opening weekend looks to be on the underside of whelming. The problem may simply be that it's an enthusiastically infantile film about and for teenage boys who can't actually get in to see it (though anyone can buy the comic, which only aggravates the frustration). It deserves well, though, because quite apart from its high-stakes experiment with a new model for funding British film with international aspirations, the film version if anything delivers more of the initial promise than the later issues of the comic itself.

Even more than *Repo Men*, *Kick-Ass* is born of a complex co-development of film and source text: written before a single issue of the eight-part series had appeared,



from scripts of the first two issues and rough drafts of the next two, and finished long before the comic ended its initial run. The result is a fascinating experiment in narrative variance, with the first half of the film tracking the comic scripts quite closely with largely original dialogue and voiceover, and then the second halves spinning divergent stories from the same outline before converging on the final page and teaser sequel bubble. In quite fundamental ways, they've come out as different stories. In one, the nerd gets the girl where the other has him roundly rejected; in one, Big Daddy's origin story is a lie where the other allows it to stand; and Mindy's familial future goes off in two incompatible directions at the ends. The finale in particular has been pumped up for film, with exemplary regard in the

later drafts for Chekhov's famous advice to Shchukin: "if in the first or second act you say that a ground-to-air anti-personnel rocket launcher hung on the wall, in the third act it must without fail blow somebody through a fifty-storey building." And while tabloid fuss has buzzed around what will probably now be the most famous line Mark Millar ever writes, Hit-Girl's funniest rude moment is actually the pure-Goldman Batsignal gag, which oddly doesn't seem to have offended anyone.

Underneath all the accent coaching, it's a deeply British film, instantly recognisable to anyone who was there as a story about growing up in Glasgow in the 1980s: a crumbling urban landscape of adult anomie brightened by an impossibly buzzing and liberational fan culture in sf and comics alike. (Did I really have a

pint each with Alan Moore and Naomi Mitchison at the same convention? It seems a dream away.) Aaron Johnson plays nerdy American physical comedy amazingly well for someone so essentially British and cool, with a balletic awkwardness recalling nothing so much as the teenage John Gordon Sinclair in the greatest of all Glaswegian comedies, Bill Forsyth's *That Sinking Feeling*. There's some irony in the fact that Mark Millar is now, after *Wanted* and this, the most successful writer Glasgow has ever produced, at a time when mythologist-laureate Alasdair Gray laments that even he can't make a proper living from writing. But then *Kick-Ass* is all about what happens when an irredeemable fanboy decides to live his nerdy dream with pride, whatever the costs, and becomes a hero.



The final line of *Kick-Ass* in both film and comic homages Tim Burton's *Batman*, the foundation stone of modern superhero films and the first in what would become a long series of dubiously seaworthy studio projects salvaged by the industry's most improbably reliable rescue operative. (Arcane factlet: *Mars Attacks!* began as an Alex Cox project in the 1985 aftermath of *Repo Man* – he was the one with the set of original cards – and the writer who replaced Cox was Martin Amis.) Now, in an impressive coup for John Lassiter's new Disney, Burton has been snagged to help repurchase a languishing out-of-copyright brand for the company in Linda Woolverton's retrovisquel of **Alice in Wonderland**, mooted for some time but rushed into production with suspiciously preemptive timing at the moment that Frank Beddor's similarly-themed *Looking Glass Wars* trilogy was hawking round the studios. Woolverton herself is a company

person to the marrow, one of the core apostles of the Vogler memo and for twenty years now the studio's key writer on its tentpole family animations – most famously on *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*, but with significant input also to *Aladdin* and *Mulan*.

Probably the most striking thing about Woolverton's *Alice* (she wanted to drop the "in Wonderland", but was overruled) is its startling inability to get Charles Dodgson on any level whatever: how his language works, his sense of humour, his play with formal architectures of logic, his cultural literacy and milieu, the whole texture of his mind and the intellectual and imaginative roots of his creation as a product of the high-Victorian Oxford memosphere. The idea, by now quite a familiar one in *Alice* sequels, seems to be to drop Carroll's fable à clef down a metafictional rabbit-hole and throw away the key, so that the film takes place in an internal fictional paracosm

created by the *Alice* books themselves – from which the books and their author are absent along with the elements of that outside world (including the Liddell sisters), and Alice has her own distinct identity and biography within that world. Woolverton's Alice is pointedly not Alice Liddell but the daughter of one "Charles Kingsleigh" – though it's only in the credits that the differential spelling is revealed, and it's hard to see why Kingsley of all figures is so insistently evoked when neither the character nor the work shows the slightest connection. But in fact all the names are eared with purest tin, and even Carroll's own get garbled: this is a film that thinks that Jabberwocky is the name of a creature and that the things that are mimsy are called borogroves. (In fairness to Woolverton, this is Burton's howler: they're correctly spelled in the script.) And yet, a lot of Woolverton's ideas have real imaginative power and resonance that Burton's direction brings out with sensitivity: particularly the conception of Underland as an essentially adolescent world misread through the eyes and logic of a seven-year-old ("Wonderland" being a child's garbling of the true name, a touch that wouldn't disgrace Neil Gaiman). The Narnification of Underland, fallen into corruption and decay as the heroine grows up and away from her childhood dreams, is an obvious but hugely effective narratogenic device; and no amount of by-numbers heroine's-journey plotting can entirely extinguish the thrill when Alice at long last suits up in white-knight armour, hefts the vorpal blade against the foe, and becomes a hero.



The season's messiest repo job on public-domain material is **Clash of the Titans**, a delirious shambles set in a weird mashed-up Xenaverse where once-familiar names and situations with three thousand years' accumulated canonicity are fed into a food processor and spewed out at projectile velocity in 3D. ("The garden of Stygia: this is where the Kraken defeated the Titans!") Beverly Cross's script for the spectacularly naff 1981 version took mild liberties of its own with tradition, mounting Perseus on Pegasus and refreshing the cast of monsters to accommodate Ray Harryhausen's last stand in old-school stop-motion effects. But now we have a Perseid in which Danae is Acrisius' wife, and dies off early; in which Cepheus, not Acrisius, is king of Argos; in which nobody gets catasterised at all, and (most surreally) Perseus gets off not with Andromeda but with his own seven-

greats-grandmother, an impressive upping of stakes on the behind-scenes hero-on-goddess action of the original when the 27-year-old Harry Hamlin knocked up the 44-year-old Ursula Andress.

Not surprisingly, the project's history has been fairly chaotic, with Lawrence Kasdan (no longer credited) sent in to fix the script before original director Stephen Norrington bailed anyway and his replacement Louis Leterrier brought in new writers to pull a significantly different version together. Gemma Arterton's character is a particularly shambolic composite of figures from different versions, while Jason Flemyng's sub-villain is *actually billed* as "Acrisius/Calibos" – the latter being the invented character from the 1981 version with whom the entirely different role of Acrisius has been imperfectly merged at some particularly

desperate juncture in development. Purely as a daft digital action parade of famous monsters of filmland, it has flair and to spare, despite some of these routines having been recently sent up in the Percy Jackson books and film. But everyone in it looks on the verge of corpsing, and with ample reason. It's not Sam Worthington's fault that he's become quite difficult to see as anyone but Jake Sully, but he's far too old for the part as written, with its coming-of-age theme and father issues with three (that's three) different dads, one killed, one to kill, and one who rejects him on the self-interested advice of Uncle Voldemort that statistics show the box-office takings from prayer are higher for apocalyptic spectacle and terror than for love. No wonder Percy's accent bounces around a bit, as the son of man and God struggles with his true identity and becomes a hero.

Not that the Judeo-Christian bossman is any better at his gig, on the evidence of bizarre theological shoot-'em-up **Legion**, which sees God give up on mankind ("I guess he just got tired of all the bullshit") and hit the red button on the end of days, with only the renegade angel Gabriel standing up for humanity as the forces of armageddon converge on Dennis Quaid's desert diner to abort the prophesied new Messiah with a biblical plague of zombies. Fortunately Gabe has toolled up beforehand as God unleashes *Apocalypse at Precinct 13* in a biblically themed *Terminator* homage with gun-toting angels serving the Father of all Skynets. In encouraging contrast to *The Book of Eli*, which has been scarily taken to heart by the Christian right, this *Left Behind* with zombies is cheerfully dismissive of all that pansy New Testament stuff. One earlier draft had the mother of our saviour blow dark angel Michael to smithereens at the end by a grenade disguised as the infant messiah, which was gloriously in spirit but has since given way to a more redemptive ending in which God, man, and angel all get second chances thanks to Gabriel's sacrifice and our heavenly Father's recognition that even the Almighty needs to work through his parenting issues. Sure, it wipes out most of humankind – kept discreetly offscreen, as the actual apocalypse happens affordably over the radio – but that's a small price to pay for an opportunity for a nerdy mechanic to win the heart of the girl he loves, as he learns to appreciate the enduring things like firearms and stunt driving, and becomes a hero.



The schooling of heroes is the story spine of **How to Train your Dragon**, a much more purposeful exercise in 3D storytelling than the afterthought and sometimes rushed conversion jobs on *Alice* and *Clash*. Indeed, DreamWorks' followup to *Monsters vs Aliens* is pretty much custom-made around the rules of 3D narrative as now understood – in which poking stuff out of the screen is yesterday's novelty, and what today's audiences want is soaring, vertigo, and deep-focus fantasy vistas, with action sequences primarily aerial and spectacle designed around moving deep perspectives and multiple planes in plenty of airy saturated colour to counterbalance the 30% loss of brightness. For this, you can't really go wrong with a *Dragonflight*-lite, even if there are a few minor mismatches between Cressida Cowell's books and what DreamWorks want their film to be – such as the fact that nobody actually rides around on dragons in the novel, and indeed that Cowell's dragon is a useless, stunted, misbehaving, literally toothless runt who would struggle under the weight of an anaesthetised gerbil. Problem? Pah.

The film retains the names, but not a lot else; "dragon training" and "Toothless" are resourcefully redefined; and there being no girl character in the first couple of volumes, the film opportunistically supplements the cast with a hot viking warrior babe called Astrid (voiced by that well-known tall Nordic blonde America Ferrera). It could generously be seen as an origin story for the books' setup, in which dragons are already part-domesticated, but really it's just a funny, likable film that has used the books to line its litter tray, with a curious but disarming conceit that the American-accented Viking teens are a larval form of Glaswegians. Nevertheless, there's a telling in-memoriam credit to the late Blake Snyder, the fondly-remembered screenwriting guru whose bible *Save the Cat!* is surprisingly nothing to do with Ellen Ripley but instead one of the more virulent of those screenplay-by-numbers templates (and the only one to have its own iPhone app). Only someone with no respect for the departed would point out that Snyder's own lengthy screenwriting career resulted in precisely two actual credits, one for Rupert Wainwright's inauspicious and unremembered Hollywood debut *Blank Check*, and one for which Snyder won his only screenwriting award: a Razzie, for *Stop or my Mom will Shoot!* But Snyder's story is that of Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III himself: this is a film in which a career loser redeems himself through his true art, the very thing for which everyone else despises him, and becomes a hero.





The dead are rather less happily served by Peter Jackson's dismal hash of **The Lovely Bones**, which showcases all his worst tics as a filmmaker: the preference for overblow over understatement; the heavy reliance on an in-house writing team who aren't always up to the task; the readiness to rise to his latterday reputation for spectacle and indulgent running times, even in tension with his natural strengths as a filmmaker. Film Four had originally optioned the still-unfinished book for Lynne Ramsay, and after her version fell through the project came Jackson's way in large part because Alice Sebold's husband was a fan of Jackson's early splatter cheapies. But regular co-writer Philippa Boyens, who brought the book to the

Jacksons in the first place, had judged the novel unfilmable; it was Fran Walsh who argued the contrary, and some of the trio's decisions make you wonder whether any of them have understood the book at all. On everyone else's reading, the two non-negotiable things that define *The Lovely Bones* are the voice of Susie Salmon and the eschatological apparatus of personal heavens. Yet in the film version, murdered teen Susie is now no longer in heaven at all but in "the Inbetween", a term used in the book for something entirely different and specific; and at the very end, when Susie finally lets go of her earthly connections, she progresses to an unseen offstage heaven-proper in the manner of *Jacob's Ladder*, *The Sixth Sense*, and all the other

films that the book worked so very hard not to be. Sebold's novel may be tosh in all kinds of ways, but it's earned its bestseller status by finding a way to present a fantasy of the afterlife that *doesn't* claim access to heaven has to be earned by some kind of posthumous moral or therapeutic exertion. (One of the unaddressed problems with this is that serial child-killers presumably also go to heaven; but let's not go there.)

Above all, the novel depends from first word to last on the voice of Susie telling her survivors' story, and on her explicit power to enter their private world on earth as an unseen omniscient recorder. And yet, having scored the slam-dunk casting coup of securing Saoirse Ronan as an absolutely pitch-perfect Susie, the film proceeds to prise her fingers one by one from their ownership of the narrative. Initially this at least makes a pretence of engaging with the novel's concerns, as Susie finds herself trapped in a voiceoverland where all she can do is observe, comment, emote, and do lavish fantasy sequences. But as the film goes on, even this much is taken away from her, as the camera occupies itself unmediated with the more expensive (and massively less interesting) adult stars. "What am I now," she laments: "the dead girl, the missing girl? I'm nothing." And she's right: Mark Wahlberg's taken over the film, she's slid down the credits to fifth, and these are the unlovely bones that have grown around her absence, while another takes her place at the top of the castlist and becomes a hero.



For a true hero's making, though, we have **Solomon Kane**, which after several failed attempts finally unleashes Bob Howard's third most famous character in that now-familiar corner of the Czech Republic that is forever preindustrial England: a dankness teeming (as in last year's *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans*) with Patrick Tatopoulos beasties and bloody awful weather. Howard's Kane was always a bit of a cipher, so Michael J. Bassett's film has made the not unreasonable decision to bypass the canon of Howard's own Kane stories and instead embed some authentically Howardian images in an origin story that will give some sense of *why* James Purefoy's version goes tramping round the West Country redeeming the locals from Satan and all his *Weird Tales* set pieces. Inevitably this backstory involves being cast out of his inheritance and becoming a genocidal antihero slaughtering pointy-helmeted Moors and issuing orders like "Silence, you

dogs!" and "Let not one of these putrid heathens live!", before renouncing violence to forestall the repossession of his soul by Satan, only to be pulled reluctantly back in to avenge Pete Postlethwaite (again), kill Jason Flemyng (third time this month), and atone for the loss of the Hurd-Wood siblings by at least rescuing the hot one. Even more than most heroes putting off their end-of-act-2 reaffirmation moment before picking up the sword and confronting their fathers, this very British version of an American hero spends a little too much of the middle not wanting to do the film, to the point where he gets crucified for it in the pouring rain (this being, you'll remember, Satan's England). All the same, it's a scandal that US distribution has so far eluded this uplifting demonstration of how, in the face of adverse studio and weather systems alike, an Englishman simply does what he's always done: buckles up, repossesses himself, and becomes a hero.



# GARY McMAHON

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